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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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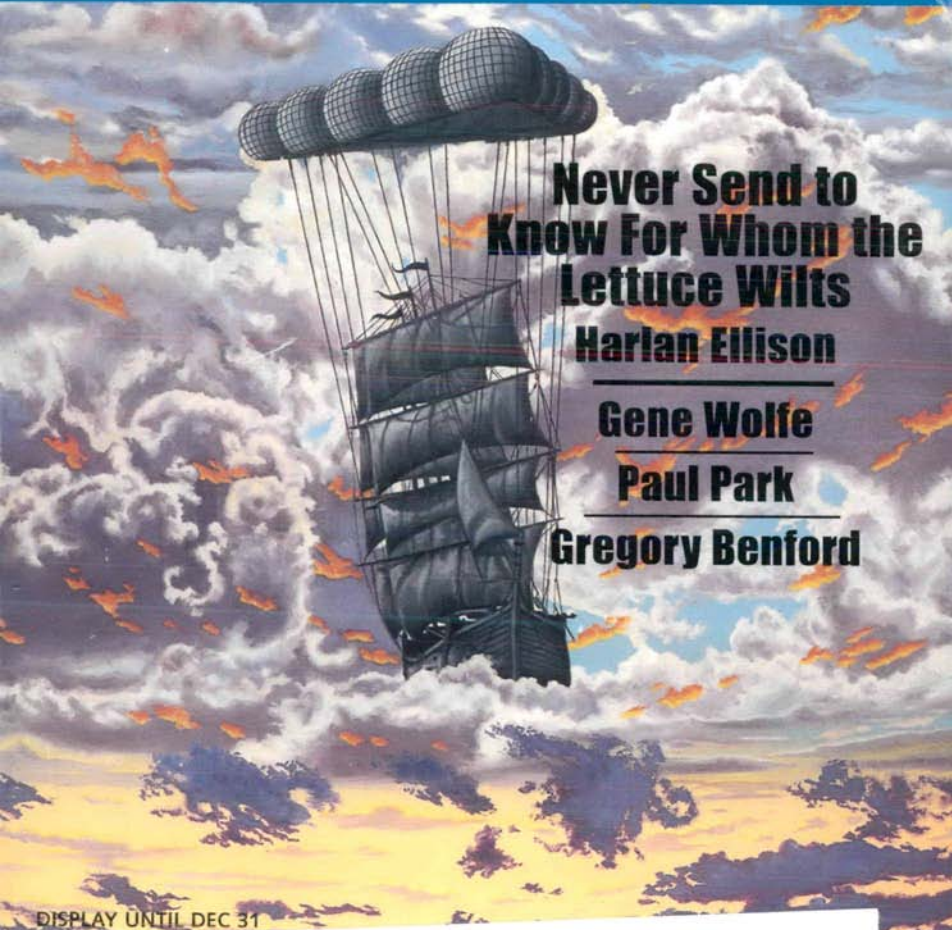

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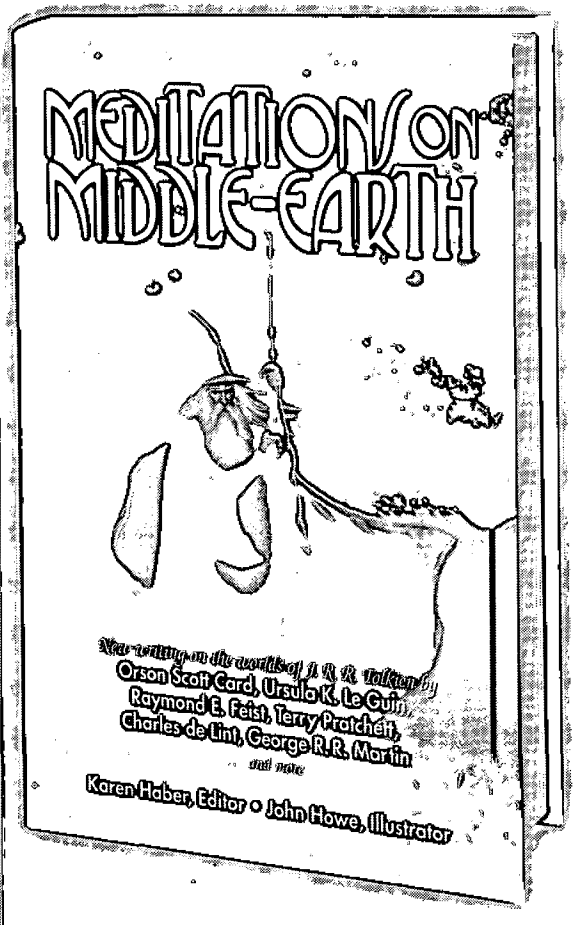
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EDITORIAL

GORDON VAN GELDER

IN HIS STORY "Slow Sculpture," Theodore Sturgeon observed that the mind panics and turns irrational when it runs out of rational options.

On the day of September 11, four days ago, I found myself turning to fiction when reality no longer made sense to me.

From Hoboken, a few miles away from Ground Zero, we could see the World Trade towers in the distance. As it happened, Sept. 11 was an exceptionally clear, cloudless day. And as the scene devolved from smoke billowing out of one building to the awful collapse and then the huge cloud that hung over the site for days, I found myself coping with the disaster by relating it to various scenes from film and literature:

• the California exodus in Ward Moore's "Lot"

• the apocalyptic nightmares of George Pelecanos's *The Big Blowdown*

• the Devlin/Emmerich films *Independence Day* and *Godzilla* and things they got right (the sense of panic) and wrong (the fast evacuation of New York).

I knew I'd reached some level of absurdity when the thought crossed my mind: *I wonder if Chip Delany will be able to get* The Fall of the Towers *reprinted now*?

In fact, I think that's when I began to regain some sense of normalcy.

That evening, I found myself browsing over an assortment of New York disaster novels: *Blackout, Thirty Seconds Over New York, The Night Manhattan Burned, The Day New York Trembled*. Most of the books date from 1965 to 1980 and mostly they're cheesy potboilers...but I found the two-dimensional characters and hokey dialogue strangely comforting. *Life goes on*, they said.

In the aftermath, I found it hard to get to work. In the face of such a

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disaster, what's the point of putting together a science fiction magazine?

Well, there are several.

First and foremost is entertainment. If we can provide some amusement, we've done a good thing.

But there's plenty of entertainment to be had elsewhere. What do science fiction and fantasy offer that aren't available elsewhere?

An ability to look ahead, for one. Ray Bradbury famously said he wrote *Fahrenheit 451* not to predict the future, but to prevent it. A shared experience like that one, powerfully felt, can have a profound impact.

Another is perspective. There's an sf writer in Washington who predicted the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. "I just looked at the scenario as though it were a science fiction novel and the fall looked like the only possible outcome," he told me in 1990. (Incidentally, when he responded to my e-mail on Sept. 11 to say he was okay, his comment was, "What a day. I swear I've seen this movie before, and I didn't like it then, either.")

There's one other thing I think — I hope — science fiction can offer at this time: understanding. Because for all the recent dissection of the event in the news and on the Internet, I still don't understand what the terrorist activities meant to accomplish (aside from instilling terror, that is). I've read excerpts from the *Koran* and articles on the Taliban. I have a grasp on the awful situation in the Gaza Strip. And I think I recognize that the World Trade Center symbolized American imperialism and capitalism. But what are we to learn from the hijackers who flew planes into the towers? That the American way of life is in peril? That imperialism has a toll around the world?

One of science fiction's fundamental themes is the question of how we treat the alien, the other. At its best, science fiction allows us insight into that other (think Tiptree's "The Color of Neanderthal Eyes." Think Longyear's "Enemy Mine." And there's "We See Things Differently" by Bruce Sterling). Right now, I find myself observing a situation that makes no sense to me. I'd love to see our genre come forth in this difficult time and build some bridges, foster some cultural understanding, make sense of the tragedy.

—GVG

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Troublemakers? What would Harlan Ellison know about the subject? Well, in the course of assembling a new collection by that name, intended for the Young Adult market, Mr. Ellison came across a story of his from 1956 that, he realized, his 22-year-old self hadn't really developed. So, as he has occasionally done before (such as when he revised "Snake in the Crypt" into "The Deathbird,") Mr. Ellison returned to the tale, expanded and reworked it, and behold the results.

Never Send to Know for Whom the Lettuce Wilts

By Harlan Ellison

TUESDAY.

Henry Leclair did a double-take. His eyes racked and reracked between the Chinese fortune cookie in his right hand and the Chinese fortune cookie *fortune* in his left. He read it again: **Tuesday.**

Then again, querulously, "Tuesday?"

That was all. Nothing more; no aphorism about meeting one's true love on Tuesday; no saccharine cliché denoting Tuesday as the advent of good fortune; no Tuesday-themed accompanying notation warning of investing in hi-tech stocks on Tuesday. Nothing. Just the narrow, slightly gray slip of rectangular paper with the printed word **Tuesday** and a period immediately after it.

Henry muttered to himself. "Why Tuesday? What Tuesday?" He absently let the fortune cookie slip from his fingers.

"Damn!" he murmured, watching the cookie sink quickly to the bottom of his water glass.

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He returned his attention to the fortune. *Tuesday.* That was today. Biting his lower lip, Harry reached for the second of the three cookies. He pulled at the edge of the fortune paper protruding from the convoluted pastry. Placing the cookie back on its plate carefully, he turned the slip over and read it:

You're the one.

Henry Leclair had been a premature baby. His mother, Martha Annette Leclair, had not carried him full term. Seven months, two days. Boom. Enter baby Henry. There was no explanation save the vagaries of female physiology. However, there *was* another explanation: Henry — even prenatal — had been curious. Pathologically, even prenatally, curious. He had wanted free from the womb, had wanted to discover *what was out there.*

When he was two years old, Henry had been discovered, in trapdoor bottom pajamas, in midwinter, crouching in the snow outside his home, waiting to see whether the white stuff fell from above or came up through the ground.

At the age of seven they had to cut Henry down. He had been swinging from a clothesline strung in the basement, drying the family wash. Henry had been curious: what does it feel like to strangle?

By the time he was thirteen, Henry had read every volume of the *Encyclopædia Brittanica,* copious texts on every phase of the sciences, all matter disseminated by the government for the past twenty-eight years, and biographies by the score. Also, somewhere between seven thousand, eight hundred, and seven thousand, nine hundred books on history, religion, and sociology. He avoided books of cartoons — and novels.

By the time he was twenty, Henry wore noticeably thick-lensed glasses; and he had migraine headaches. But his all-consuming curiosity had not been satiated.

On his thirty-first birthday, Henry was unmarried and digging for bits of a stone tablet in the remains of a lost city somewhere near the Dead Sea. Curiosity.

Henry Leclair was curious about almost everything. He wondered why a woman wore egret feathers in her hat, rather than those of the peacock. He wondered why lobsters turned red when they were cooked.

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He wondered why office buildings did not have thirteenth floors. He wondered why men left home. He wondered what the soot-accumulation rate in his city was. He wondered why he had a strawberry mark on his right knee. He wondered all sorts of things.

Curiosity. He was helpless, driven, doomed in its itching, overwhelming, adhesive grip.

You're the one.

"I'm the one?" Henry blurted incredulously. "Me? I'm the *what*? *What* am I? What the blazes are you talking about?" He spoke to the insensate, unresponsive fortune paper.

This was, suddenly, overpoweringly, a conundrum for Henry. He knew, deep in his soul-matter, that curiosity demanded he must solve this intrusive enigma. Two such fortunes — two such incomprehensible mind-troublers — were more than mere coyness on someone's part. There was something not quite right here. *Something*, as Henry put it to himself, with stunning originality, *more than meets the eye!*

Henry called for the waiter. The short, almost bald, and overly contemptuous Oriental passed twice more — once in either direction — finally coming to a halt beside Henry's booth. Henry extended the two fortunes and said, "Who writes these?"

"我不知你講甚么," answered the waiter, with a touch of insouciant, yet distingué, impudence.

"I beg your pardon," Henry said, removing his noticeably thick-lensed glasses, dangling them in his other hand, "but would you mind speaking English?"

The waiter wrinkled his nose in distaste, stroked the cloth napkin draped over his forearm, and pointed to the manager, lounging half-asleep behind the cash register.

"Thanks," said Henry absently, his attention to the chase now directed elsewhere. He started to rise as the waiter turned. "Oh — check, please." The waiter stopped dead in his tracks, drew his shoulders up as though he had been struck an especially foul blow, and returned to the table. He hurriedly scribbled the check, all in Chinese glyphs except the total, and plunked it on the table. Muttering Eastern epithets, he stalked away.

Henry absently dropped the remaining fortune cookie in his jacket

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pocket as he picked up the check — so anxious was he now to speak to the manager. Quickly slapping his hat on his head, he gathered his topcoat off the chair, dropped a dollar and some change, and headed for the manager. The old man was slumped across the glass case, one arm securely pressed against the cash register's drawer. He awakened at almost the instant Henry stopped in front of him. His hand extended automatically for check and cash.

While the fellow was placing his check on a spindle, Henry leaned across and asked, quietly, "Can you tell me where you get these little fortunes?" He showed one. Henry expected more misdirection and confusion, as he had experienced with the waiter, but the Chinese manager did not take his eyes off the change he was delivering as he said, "We buy in lots. From trading company that sell us cookies. You want buy dozen, take home with you?"

Henry fended him off, and asked the name and address of the company. After a few seconds of deliberation, the manager reached out of sight under the counter, dragged forth a large notebook. He opened it, ran a finger down a column of addresses, said, "Saigon–San Francisco Trading Company, 431 Bessemer Street."

Henry thanked him and strode out onto the sidewalk. "Taxi!" he called into the river of passing cars, and a few minutes later was riding toward 431 Bessemer Street. The *crimson clutching claw of cold curiosity*. Oh, my.

THE SAIGON–SAN FRANCISCO Trading Company was located in a condemned warehouse on the desolate lower end of Bessemer Street. In the manufacturing and warehouse section of the city, Bessemer Street was regarded as the drop-off dead end of the known universe. On Bessemer Street, the lower end was regarded much the same. Henry had an idea this building was the last rung on the ladder of aversion. Beyond lay the dark, restless river.

The windows of the pathetic warehouse were, for the most part, broken and sightless; many were boarded up. The building itself leaned far out of plumb, dolorous, as though seeking impecunious support from some destitute relative on its west side. Its west side faced an empty, rat-infested lot.

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So, for that matter, did the east, north, and south sides. Dolorous, pathetic, rat-infested.

"A pretty sorry place for an active trading company," murmured Henry, pulling his coat collar up about his ears. The wind ricocheting through the darkened warehouse canyons was rock-chilling, this late at night. Henry glanced at his wristwatch. Nearly eleven o'clock. It was the hour when the terminally curious talked to themselves:

"Um. Probably no one working at this time, no late shift, but at least I can get an idea of what the place is like, as long as I'm here." He mentally kicked himself for taking off in such a flurry of desire to solve the riddle of the fortune papers. "I should have waited till reasonable working hours, tomorrow morning. Ah, well..."

He walked across the street, stepping quickly in and out of the smudge of light thrown by a lone, remarkably, unshattered street lamp. Henry glanced nervously behind him.

Far off, back the way they had come, he could see the rapidly disappearing taillights of the taxi.

"Why the devil didn't I ask him to wait?" Henry had no answer for himself, though one did, in fact, exist: the mind-clouding power of curiosity. Now he would have to walk far in the wind, the cold, the dark, to the nearest hack stand or at least an inhabited thoroughfare.

The building loomed over him. He went up to the front door. Locked solid; steel bolts welded to the frame.

"Hmm. Locked up for good." He glanced at the dirty CONDEMNED sign beside the door. Then he muttered, "Odd," with uncertainty, because there were fresh truck tire treadmarks in the mud of the street. The tracks led around to the rear of the warehouse. Henry found his interest in this problem mounting. Piqued, piqued, piqued. Deserted, condemned: but still getting deliveries, or pickups? Curiouser and Curiouser.

He walked around to the rear of the warehouse, following the truck tracks. They stopped beside a number of square indentations in the mud. "Somebody left a bunch of crates here."

He looked around. The rear of the building bulked uglier than the front — if that was possible. All but one of the windows was boarded, and *that* one...

Henry realized he was looking at light streaming through the window,

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there on the top floor. It was blanked out for a moment, then came back. As though someone had walked in front of it. *But that light's in the ceiling,* Henry thought wildly. *I can see the edge of the fixture from here. How can anyone walk in front of it?*

His wonderment was cut short by still further signs of activity in the building. A circular opening in the wall next to the window — quite dark and obviously a pipe-shaft of some sort — was emitting large puffs of faintly phosphorescent green fog.

"There's someone up there," Henry concluded, ever the rocket scientist.

The Urge rose in Henry Leclair once more. The problem thumped and bobbed in his mind. Curiosity, now a *tsunami,* had utterly overwhelmed even the tiniest atoll of caution and self-preservation. *You're the one,* you say? *You'd better believe it because here I come!*

He carefully examined the rear of the building. No doors. But a first floor window was broken, and the boards were loose. As quietly as possible, he disengaged the nails' grip on the sill, and prised the boards off. Dragging two old crates from the dumpster across the alley, Henry stacked them, and climbed into the building. Curious is, as curious does. (Did anyone hear a cat being killed?)

It was pitch, night, ebony, lusterless, without qualification *dark* inside. Henry held his pipe lighter aloft and rasped it, letting the flame illuminate the place for a few seconds.

Broken crates, old newspapers, cobwebs, dust. The place looked deserted. But there *had* been the light from above.

He sought out the elevator. Useless. He sought out the stairs. Bricked off. He sat down on a packing crate. Annoyed.

Then the sound of glugging came to him.

Glug. Glug. And again, glug. Then a sort of washed-out, whimpery glug that even Henry could tell was a defective: Gluuuuuug!

"*Plummis!*" swore a voice in shivering falsetto.

Henry listened for a minute more, but no other sound came to him. "Oh, that was cursing, all right," murmured Henry to himself. "I don't know who's doing it, or where it's coming from, but that's unquestionably someone's equivalent of a damn or hell!" He began searching for the source of the voice.

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As he neared one wall, the voice came again. "Plummis, valts er webbel er webbel er webbel..." the voice trailed off into muttered webbels.

Henry looked up. There was light shining through a ragged hole in the ceiling, very faintly shining. He stepped directly under it to assay a clearer view...

...and was yanked bodily and immediately up through many such holes in many such ceilings, till his head came into violent contact with a burnished metal plate in the ceiling of the top floor.

"Aaargh!" moaned Henry, crashing to the floor, clutching his banged head, clutching his crushed hat.

"Serves you qquasper!" the shivering falsetto voice remonstrated. Henry looked around. The room was filled with strangely shaped machines resting on metal workbenches. They were all humming, clicking, gasping, winking and glugging efficiently. All, that is, but one, that emitted a normal glug then collapsed into a fit of prolonged *gluuuuuuging*.

"Plummis!" Falsetto cursing: vehemently.

Henry looked around once more. The room was empty. He glanced toward the ceiling. The unie was sitting cross-legged in the air, about six inches below the ceiling.

"You're..." The rest of it got caught somewhere in Henry's throat.

"I'm Eggzaborg. You'd call me a unie, if you had the intelligence to call me."

"You're..." Henry tried again.

"I'm invading the Earth," he said snappishly. The unie completed the thought for Henry, even though that was not even remotely what Henry had been thinking.

Henry took a closer look at the unie.

He was a little thing, no more than two feet tall, almost a gnome, with long, knobbly arms and legs, a pointed head and huge, blue, owl-like eyes with nictitating eyelids. He had a fragile antenna swaying gently from the center of his forehead. It ended in a feather. A light-blue feather. *Almost robin's egg blue*, Henry thought inanely.

The unie's nose was thin and straight, with tripartite nostrils, overhanging a tight line of mouth, and bracketed by cherubic, puffy cheeks. He had no eyebrows. His ears were pointed and set very high on his skull. He was hairless.

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The unie wore a form-fitting suit of bright yellow, and pinned to the breast was a monstrous button, half the size of his chest, which quite plainly read:

CONQUEROR

The unie caught Henry's gaze. "The button. Souvenir. Made it up for myself. Can't help being pompous, giving in to hubris once in a while." He said it somewhat sheepishly. "Attractive, though, don't you think?"

Henry closed his eyes very tightly, pressing with the heels of both hands. He wrinkled his forehead, letting his noticeably thick-lensed glasses slide down his nose just a bit, to unfocus the unie. "I am not *well*," he said, matter-of-factly. "Not well at all."

The shivering falsetto broke into chirping laughter.

"Well enough *now!*" Eggzaborg chortled. "But just wait three thousand years — just wait!" Henry opened his left eye a slit. Eggzaborg was rolling helplessly around in the air, clutching a place on his body roughly where his abdomen should have been. The unie bumped lightly against the ceiling, besotted with his revelry.

A thin shower of plaster fell across Henry's face. He felt the cool tickle of it on his eyelids and nose. *That plaster*, thought Henry, *was real. Ergo, this unie must be real.*

This is a lot like being in trouble.

"You wrote those fortunes?" Henry inquired, holding them up for the unie to see.

"Fortunes?" The unie spoke to himself. "For...*ohhh!* You must mean the mentality-crushers I've been putting in the cookies!" He rubbed long, thin fingers together. "I *knew*, I say, I just *knew* they would produce results!" He looked pensive for a moment, then sighed. "Things have been so slow. I've actually wondered once or twice if I'm really succeeding. Well, more than once or twice, actually. *Actually*, about ten or twenty *million* times! *Plummis!*"

He let his shoulders slump, and folded his knobbly hands in his knobbly lap, looking wistfully at Henry Leclair. "Poor thing," he said. (Henry wasn't sure if the unie meant his visitor...or himself.)

Henry ignored him for a moment, deciding to unravel this as he had always unraveled every conundrum in his search for information: calmly,

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sequentially, first things first. Since the unie's comments were baffling in the light of any historical conquests Henry had ever read about, he decided to turn his immediate attention elsewhere before trying to make sense of the nonsensical. First things first.

He crawled to his feet and unsteadily walked over to the machines. All the while glancing up to keep an eye on Eggzaborg. The machines hurt his eyes.

A tubelike apparatus mounted on an octagonal casing was spitting — through an orifice — buttons. The shape of the machine hurt his eyes. The buttons were of varying sizes, colors, shapes. Shirt buttons, coat buttons, industrial sealing buttons, watch-cap buttons, canvas tent buttons, exotic purpose buttons. Many buttons, all kinds of buttons. Many of them were cracked, or the sides of the thread holes were sharpened enough to split the thread. They all fell into a trough with holes, graded themselves, and plunged through attached tubes into cartons on the floor. Henry blinked once.

The shape of the second machine hurt Henry's eyes; the device seemed to be grinding a thin line between the head and shank of twopenny nails. The small buzz-wheel ground away while the nail spun, held between pincers. As soon as an almost invisible line had been worn on the metal, the nail dropped into a bucket. Henry blinked twice.

The other machines, whose shapes *really* hurt Henry's eyes, were performing equally petty, yet subversive, procedures. One was all angles and glass sheets, leading to the hole in the wall Henry had seen from below. It was glugging frantically. The puffs of glowing green fog were still erupting sporadically. "That one wilts lettuce," Eggzaborg said, with pride.

"It *what*?"

The unie looked shocked. "You don't think lettuce wilts of its own accord, do you?"

"Well, I never thought about it — that is — food rots, it goes bad of its own...uh, nature...entropy...doesn't it? It *doesn't*? Sure it does, yeah?"

"Poor thing," the unie repeated, looking even more wistful than before. Pity shone in his eyes. "It's almost like taking advantage of a very slow pony."

Henry felt this was the moment; but since the unie was obviously not human, he would have to handle things carefully. He was dealing with an

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alien intellect. Oh, yes, that was the long and short of it. An alien from another place in the universe. An e.t. sort of creature. Yes, indeed. He must never forget that. Probably a highly dangerous alien intellect. He didn't *look* very dangerous. But then, one couldn't tell with these alien intellects. One always has to be on one's toes with these devious, cunning alien intellects, Orson Welles knew that.

"All right, then," said Henry, nay, challenged Henry, "so you wilt lettuce. So what? How does that aid you in conquering the Earth?"

"Disorganization," the unie answered in a deeply significant tone of voice, pointing one ominous stick finger at Henry. "Disorganization and demoralization! Undercuts you! Unsettles, and unhinges, you! Makes you teeter, throws you off balance, makes you uncertain about the basic structure of things: gravity, entropy, cooking times. Strikes at the very fibers of your security! Heh!" He chuckled several times more, and folded his hands. There was a lot of that: folding and unfolding.

Henry began to realize just how alien this alien's thought-processes *really* were. Though he didn't recognize the psychological significance of wilted lettuce, it obviously meant something big to the unie. Big. He marked it down in his mind.

Still, he didn't seem to be getting anywhere meaningful. He decided to try another method to get the unie to talk, to reveal all. "I don't get this," Henry said. "I just don't *believe* it. You're just a demented magician or — or something. You aren't what you say at all. By the way," he added snidely, "just what the hell *are* you?"

The unie leaped to his feet in the air, bumping his pointed head on the ceiling. More plaster sifted down. "*Plummis!*" cursed the little being, massaging his skull. Like the lettuce, his antenna had begun to wilt noticeably.

He was furious. "You *dare* question the motives, machinations, methodology and...and..." he groped for an alliterative word, "*power* of Eggzaborg?" His face, normally an off-blue, not unpleasant sky tone, had slowly turned a fierce aquamarine. "Fool, dolt, imbecile, gleckbund, clod, bumpkin, jerk!" The words rolled off his tongue, spattered in Henry's face. Henry cringed.

He was beginning to think this might not be the most salutary approach.

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He became convinced of his miscalculation as his feet left the floor and he found himself hanging upside-down in the air, vibrating madly, all the pocket-change and keys and bismuth tablets cascading from his pockets, plonking him on the head as gravity had its way with them. His noticeably thick-lensed eyeglasses finally fell off. Everything became a blur. "S-s-s-stop! P-p-please s-s-s-stop!" Henry begged, twisting about in the air like a defective mixmaster. "U-u-u-uggedy-ug-ug!" he ugged as the unie bounced him, then pile-drove Henry's head against the floor, numerous times, with numerous painful clunks. His pipe lighter fell out of his vest pocket and cracked him under the chin.

Suddenly, it stopped. Henry felt his legs unstiffen, and he somersaulted over onto the floor, lying face up, quite a bit the worse for having been uniehandled. He was puffing with agony, when the unie's face floated into what little was left of his blurred range of vision.

"Terribly sorry," the unie said, looking down. He appeared to be sincerely concerned about his actions. He picked up Henry's glasses and smoothly hooked them back in place on Henry's head. "It's just a result of waiting all these years. Six hundred years waiting. That's a long time to anticipate, to yearn for relief on a conquest-shift that, at best, would make anyone edgy. This planet isn't all that entertaining, meaning no offense; but you do only have the one moon, the one sun, no flemnall, and a mere four seasons. I'm three hundred and fifty years past due for the usual, standard rotation relief, and I really need some. I'm six hundred years total time on this unimportant tour of duty and, well, I'm feelin' mighty low." He sighed, bit what little there was of his lips, and sank into silent glumness.

Henry felt a bit of his strength coming back. At least enough to ask a few more questions.

"T-tell me the story, E-Eggzaborg."

The unie came to a floating halt above the prostrate Henry Leclair. "Well..." he began, with reluctance, to talk to this cretinous human, "the story is simple. I graduated with honors from Dorvis Lepham. One of the top phages, of course. First in quatt wunkery, first in padgett, sixteenth in crumbpf, but the professor had it in for me...well, anyway...I *am* a unie. I was thus assigned to — "

Henry cut him off. "What is a unie?"

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"Shut up, stop interrupting!"

"But where did you come from?"

The unie purpled again, and Henry felt (with growing terror) his body twitch, as though it were about to ascend yet again. But it didn't, and he knew the unie had brought his temper under control. "*Plummis*, man! Let me finish! Stop your blasphemous interrupting!" Snappish. Very snappish. Probably not a congenial species, in the main. Likely did not play well with other species.

Henry quickly motioned him to continue, calming him with the same movement.

Eggzaborg huffed, then resumed. "Space, moron. Space. Out there." He pointed. Generally in the direction of some space. Not *all* space, but at least *some* space. "I came from space. Now don't interrupt — I come from out there where you have no idea a place exists. Both in space, and in *between* layers of space. Interstitial expanses. Voluminous voids. I am here because — I am here because — well, *plummis*, fellow, I'm here to *conquer!*" He vacillated his antenna helplessly, at a loss to embellish the explanation.

"But *why*?"

"Why? Why? How obstinately ignorant can you be? Haven't I told you: *I'm a unie!* What does that make you think of?"

"Fried shrimp," replied Henry.

"Oooooh!" The unie hurtled about the room, barely missing collisions with walls and machines. "The impertinence! *That's* one of the reasons I've stayed so well hidden! I can't stand the stupidity of you people! Rude! You're unconscionably rude! Probably the most insulting, rude, boorish species in this galaxy, possibly the entire expanding universe! When you think of *unie* you just naturally think of *conquest!*"

"I do?" asked Henry, still not quite convinced.

The unie subsided into muted sulfurous cursing.

Henry decided to try flattery. "You speak English very well."

"Why shouldn't I?" snapped the unie. "I *invented* it!"

That quieted Henry again. He wasn't quite sure for a moment whether he was lying on floor or ceiling. "And French? Did you invent French, too? What about Tagalog and Aramaic? Basque is nice. I've always wondered about Basque. So: Basque, too?"

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The unie looked genuinely bewildered for a moment, then tried again, looking at Henry with piercing eyes, daring him to interrupt. "I was graduated in a large class. There was much talk that year (though we don't judge by your years, of course) (we don't even call them years) (in fact, 'years' is an ugly word, and sounds like pure gibberish if you say it over and over) (years years years years years years, years years years, see what I'm pointing out here) as I was saying, there was much talk of the coming Flib. Though I thought it was superfluous exhalations, I was worried by the rapidity with which my classmates were being sent out." He shivered fearfully, and mumbled, "The Flib...oh." He trembled again, then resumed. "When *my* placket was oiled, and I knew *I* was to go out, all other thoughts fled from my head.

"Now, I've been here three hundred and fifty years longer than my shift, six hundred years total, six *hundred* years, and I can't contact the Lephamaster. The Flib has likely already vastened longitudinally. It's not that I'm exactly frightened," he hastened to add, "it's just that I'm a little, well, *worried*, and I'd like a drink of yerbl. Oh yes," and he looked wistful, "just a melkh of pale, thick, moist yerbl."

"If you've been here six hundred years," asked Henry, beginning to rise to a sitting position, "why haven't you conquered us already?"

The unie looked at him strangely. "Who ever heard of conquering in less than four thousand years? It wouldn't be ethical. We're talking ethics here, you barbarian." He pouted and shined his button with a forearm.

Henry decided to risk another edgy question: "But how can writing cookie fortunes and wilting lettuce conquer us?"

"That isn't *all* I do," responded the unie. "Why, I make people smile (that's *very* important), and I rust water pipes, and I make pigs' tails curl, and I cure colds, and I make shingles fall off roofs, and I stop wars, and I dirty white shoes, and I — " He seemed intending to continue for some time, but Henry, confused, stopped him.

"Excuse my interruption," he said, "but I don't understand. There's probably a point I've missed. What's the overall *plan*?"

The unie threw up his hands in exasperation, and Henry noticed for the first time that the alien had only four fingers on each.

"That 'plan' as you so casually dismiss it, you meat-plug, has been deployed for millennia, by the unies," the little being said, "and no one has

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understood it but the top Lephamasters. How the blazes do you expect *me* to explain anything as complicated as that to a buffoon like *you*? That plan was formulated to handle four thousand years of exigencies, and you want a rundown in four *sentences!* Utter imbecile!"

"You've been here six hundred years," murmured Henry in awe.

"Yes. Rather clever the way I've kept out of sight, don't you think?"

"Oh, I don't know." Henry felt a spark of belligerence burning. All the slamming and jouncing and bouncing had finally overcome even his insatiable curiosity, and he was now more than slightly cheesed off. "I'll bet you're the basis for all those dumb legends about gnomes and gremlins and poltergeists; and flying saucers, too. Not such a terrific job if you ask me. Not to mention that your, what's his name, your Lephamaster seems to have forgotten you even exist!"

Eggzaborg spread his hands in unhappiness. "There are bound to be tiny slip-ups in six hundred years. Particularly with the defective screens on those," he cursed in an alien tongue, "raw-material trucks I use. They're very old now, pretty worn, and every once in a while some snoopy human will see one coming or going."

Henry realized he was, in fact, referring to UFOs, to flying saucers. Then, what the unie had said a minute before suddenly sank through to Henry's conscious: "*You say you stop wars*?" Amazement rang in his voice.

"Certainly. How else can I conquer you? If you keep killing each other off, what'll be left for me to conquer?" He looked at Henry appealingly. "I do wish you'd cease all that shooting and stabbing and blowing-up nonsense."

Any would-be tyrants Henry had ever read about had always *encouraged* inner strife. The unie seemed to have his wires crossed. "Are you sure you're supposed to *stop* wars?"

"Certainly!"

Henry finally decided it was the reverse-thinking of the strange alien intellect. He couldn't fathom the rationale, but it certainly seemed like a good deal for humanity.

"What are those button and nail machines over there doing?"

"Those are implement-cripplers," the unie said, with ill-concealed pride. "Have you ever stopped to wonder why you still use buttons, rather

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than — for instance — clasps, clamps, zippers, Velcro, seams and other much better contrivances? The button is easily lost, loses its center when sent through the laundry, breaks threads, isn't very attractive, and is difficult to open and close. Ever wonder why you still use them?" He didn't wait for Henry to answer. "Because I keep sifting supplies of them into stores, and they have to sell them, and that creates more of a demand.

"And there is, of course, the constant mindwashing of my 24-hour-a-day Coercive Brain Ray. That helps a lot."

Henry said, "Buttons. Insidious, no doubt about it. And the 'nail crippler' machine over there?

"The nails are treated so they go in at angles. You ever see anyone who could hit ten consecutive nails straight into a piece of wood? They slant, they bend, they break! That's what my sweet little machine over there does! Don't you just love it? The other machine, the trapezoidal one, helps keep the birth rate up, to offset the death-rate in your wars." He looked at Henry sternly. "It puts pin-sized holes in pro — "

Henry blanched, cut him off quickly. "Er — that's all right; I understand. But what about those fortune cookies? Why the weird messages?"

"Demoralization. See how they bothered *you*? Just think of a million people opening fortune cookies and finding the message, *No way*, inside! They find a message, *Forget about it*, or *It's lost, you'll never find it*. What do you think happens to their frame of minds, their self-confidence, their *joie de vivre*? They don't know it, but it unnerves them for the rest of the week, throws them off-balance, to find a fortune cookie fortune, and all it says, enigmatically, maddeningly, is 'Tuesday!'"

"Do they all say 'Tuesday'?"

"The dated ones do. That's the only day I'm sure there will be no ominous omens of a Flib." He shuddered. Henry didn't know what Flib was, but the unie certainly seemed to be bothered, even terrified, of it. "Oh, I'm *so* pleased they're getting results! I think I'll step up production."

He walked down the air to a flat, multi-snake-armed machine, and punched a tip at one end. The machine began to *wonkle.*

Wonkle, wonkle, wonkle. "*Plummis!*" Eggzaborg swore, dealing the machine a vicious kick. The machine wonkled once more in agony, then began winkling. Winkle, winkle, winkle.

Eggzaborg looked relieved. "You'd think even this refurbished

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equipment would hold up better. It's only about a thousand years old. We don't judge in years, of course," he reminded Henry again. "No years. We're not *from* here, remember?"

"Why are you bothering to tell me all this?" asked Henry. "I should think you'd have to keep all this secret...or get rid of me." Suddenly Henry was very much more frightened. "Are you going to kill me...and...recycle my mortal flesh?"

The unie settled back in its cross-legged crouch. "Are you nuts? *Kill* you?!? I won't *be* here in another ten minutes, and you'll never find me again. Besides, who'd believe you if you told them what you'd seen? You people are such moles." He began to laugh. High, thin, squeaky. It rasped on Henry's nerves. "Kill you. Recycle you. Oh, that's rich! What ultra stupegoids you humans be!"

Henry lost his temper with flashing poor judgment. "You, sir," he began, from a lifetime of practicing the amenities, "are a charlatan and an egotistical..."

He never finished the epithet. Suddenly every coin in his pockets — every coin that was left from his previous jouncing — became screeching hot; every hair in every pore developed a life of its own, writhing and twisting, wrenching his skin over every inch of his agonized body; the soles of his shoes became peanut butter; his nose began to run; his pen leaked through his shirt. All at once.

Then he was turned upside-down, downside-up in the air yet again, and began to experience alternate hot and cold waves of stomach-convulsing nausea.

"You know something," the unie said, quietly, "if I didn't want to conquer you wretched gobbets so much, I'd — I'd *kill* the lot of you. You're an arrogant...*human being*!" He said the last, much as Henry would have said "leper," or "dog catcher," or "televangelist."

"Now scram, you nosy, rude simian! And just wait three thousand years! Just you wait — *you'll see*!"

An instant later, Henry found himself in an apartment at 6991 Perry Avenue, 5th Floor, sharing a bathtub with a very small naked child and her three plastic ducks. He sputtered several times, quacked once in hopes it might distract someone enough so they would not notice he wasn't a duck, clambered dripping from the tub, and was shortly thereafter taken

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into police custody, read his rights, casually but thoroughly bludgeoned, dragged down five flights of tenement stairs, and eventually transported to Incarceration Island. Not curiously, Henry was no longer curious.

THE CELL WAS drafty, and Henry was certain he was coming down with a beastly case of intestinal flu. His cellmate was ignoring him, while picking between his naked toes and eating what he discovered there. Henry was ill, he was nauseated, and he was still confused by the entire escapade. Nonetheless, he was desperately trying to cling to the impression that things were better than most people thought. (Some jobs are simply not worth the effort.)

Yet somehow, either because the unie had been sent out by the Lephamaster too quickly, or because there had been a glitch in the system and his people had forgotten he was here, or because this poor Earth had been an insignificant operation to begin with, or because he had gone mad having been left here too long, or perhaps, pathetically, the unie had been contaminated by human contact, or maybe, simply, just because of the normal alien viewpoint, humanity was getting Help From Outside. And Henry smiled.

Curiously, Henry was suddenly less troubled by his circumstance than common sense and pragmatism would have decreed. Yes, he had been through a physically unpleasant and unbelievable experience, one he could not convey to another human being lest he be put in a soft room dressed in clothing with sleeves too long for his arms. Yes, he was in jail waiting arraignment on a plethora of charges that only *began* with moral turpitude. And, yes, he was probably coming down with intestinal flu, not to mention that the goon across from him had started exploring elsewhere on his person for edibles. But...

His lifelong curiosity, which had gotten him into this wretched situation, had been well and truly cured; and it had been exchanged for something no one else on Earth possessed.

Something more valuable than freedom or sanity or the right to vote, which he would probably lose if convicted.

Every human being on the planet, whether a barrio child in La Paz or a multimillionaire in Lucerne, whether an igloo-dwelling Aleut or an

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iconoclastic Algerian, no matter old or young, male or female, rich or poor, *everyone* lived with some measure of terror about the future, some lesser or greater trepidation about war, the Bomb, global warming, meteors from space, crime in the streets, the pollution of the gene pool, the endless inhumanity of the human race toward itself.

Everyone harbored the fear of tomorrow.

But not Henry.

Henry was in on the secret.

Henry's curiosity had taken him to the source of the revelation that we were all going to do just fine, that there was a demented, all screwed-up, backward-thinking alien creature named Eggzaborg who, under the misconception that he was laying the groundwork for alien invasion, was actually looking out for the human race and this pitiful planet...at least for the next three thousand-plus years.

For the next three thousand-plus years nothing terminally awful could happen. The Flib, whatever horror that was, held fear for the unie, but probably was so alien it would have no effect on the human race.

Henry was in clover. One day he'd be out of jail. One day he'd be back in the world. And he'd be the happiest guy on the planet, because he was the only guy, the *only* guy...who *knew*!

His ruminations were cut short by the rumbling of his stomach. An hour earlier the inmates of cell block 4 had marched lockstep to lunch, and even though Henry had smiled at the scrap of wilted lettuce on his plate, he couldn't eat what had been doled out; he was still hungry.

Pretty miserable meal, he mused. Then the remembrance of the third fortune cookie in his pocket made him smile. Dessert! The guards had left it in his jacket pocket — clearly no "escape potential," any more than a stick of gum — when they had searched him and taken his belt and glasses and shoelaces and personal possessions.

He fished it out. It was still soggy from the bathwater in Apartment 5-C at 6991 Perry Avenue, but it *was* edible.

He pulled at the fortune. It came loose and he read it, choking on a slice of air. He remembered what the unie had said about the Flib. The fortune didn't say *Tuesday.* Horribly, ominously, it said:

Wednesday.

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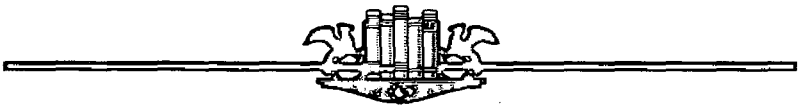

Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

NOVELLAS are such awkward beasts. Too short to be novels, too long to be stories, they inhabit the gray borderland between the two, their only company their not-quite-so-disenfranchised cousin, the novelet. Novellas are a hard sell in commercial terms, taking up too much space in anthologies and magazines, yet (at least in the eyes of many publishers) unable to be published on their own unless they have some other selling point attached to them, which usually means a Big Name author. But for a writer, novellas can often be the perfect length. Some stories simply come to us at that length, and good authors will go ahead and write them anyway, following their muse, if not the market. Because there are benefits to be found.

You're not as confined as you are with a short story; you're allowed asides and you can lay a larger banquet of character and story; and you don't need to pad the story to plump it up into a sellable novel either. Novellas can be the perfect length for readers, too, allowing them a better sample of an author's ability to carry a longer story, without having to invest in a full, often very fat, novel. Or trilogy. Or series. Novellas can be easily read in an evening or an afternoon, and there's something to be said for reading a story (often with many of the complexities and much of the scope of a novel) all in one sitting — a luxury most of us can't afford with novels.

But as I touched on above, they're awkward beasts to find homes for.

Enter, yet again, the small presses.

I know in this column I tend to espouse the small or specialty press houses with more enthusiasm than some might feel they deserve. And I certainly don't feel that there *shouldn't* be larger publishing houses. The larger houses get the job done: the big books, the popular

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books, the Kings and Koontzes, and they publish them in quantities that make sure everyone has a chance to acquire one.

But there are niche markets that simply aren't viable for a larger publishing house to attempt to address: Out-of-print classics by authors no longer quite so much in favor with the general reading public. Short story collections by midlist authors who couldn't hope to sell thousands of copies of what are often excellent books, but can certainly sell a thousand or so. A writer's older, less polished work. Books that are experimental in subject matter or approach. Books of awkward lengths, or profusely illustrated, or...well, the list goes on.

Frankly, and especially in fantasy and sf, I consider the smaller presses to be almost the life-blood of our field. They keep our history alive and point a way to the future. Sometimes they simply publish fine books that, for one reason or another, wouldn't find a home otherwise. And sometimes, when the press (usually a one- or two/three-man operation) or its editor has vision, it actually generates work we wouldn't see otherwise.

As is the case with Peter Crowther's ongoing novella series with PS Publishing. Crowther actively commissions these novellas — no doubt awaking great excitement in the authors approached. Not only can they finally write that story of awkward length, but somebody actually wants to go to contract on it.

Previous books in the series have included work by Graham Joyce, Michael Marshall Smith, Paul J. McAuley, and other worthy authors. Today we're going to discuss....

A Writer's Life, by Eric Brown, PS Publishing, 2001, $40 HB, $18 PB.

Eric Brown is a new writer for me, a popular sf writer who turns here to an almost old-fashioned style of storytelling as he introduces us to a midlist writer who becomes entranced with the forgotten work of an older author who vanished under mysterious circumstances. I'm not sure why stories about authors are so popular, or if they even are. One might consider it laziness on the author's part — after all, there's no research involved. Or perhaps it's them following the hoary axiom of "write what you know," and this is what they know. What I know is that I enjoy them,

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probably for the same reason that, in a magazine, I'll turn first to the interview with an author, an artist, a musician. I'm fascinated by the creative process, whether it's a true account of how the creator goes about his or her job, or a fictionalized account. I'm not looking for how-to tips, though even such writing can be illuminating (particularly when it's discussing a medium in which I have no experience). I'm simply intrigued by how people manage to snare the ephemeral impulses dancing about in their heads and give them some sort of physical form.

Brown explores this, along the way creating a dialogue in regards to the finished work — how something that so appeals to one can leave another cold. He also tells a rousing good story, with a mystery that didn't let this reader down, introduces us to characters we can care about, and brings his English countryside setting to affectionate life with just the right amount of telling detail. The voice of his protagonist always ring true, as do the snippets of quoted work, reviews, and such that he uses as chapter epigraphs.

In short, I was greatly taken with the book, Brown's writing, and the presentation of both, bound behind the simple yet evocative cover photograph/collage by Julian Flynn that graces the book jacket.

My only complaint with the book is that the introduction by Paul Di Filippo, excellent though it is, should have been an afterword, as I felt it gave away a bit too much of the story. But that's a small point, and if you haven't read the book yet yourself, you've now been forewarned and can hold off looking at the introduction until you've read the story first.

Also released at the same time was *Nearly People*, a Dystopian novel by Conrad Williams with an introduction by Michael Marshall Smith and a cover by Wieslaw Walkuski.

These hardcovers are limited and signed by the contributors, but there are also less expensive trade paperbacks available. If your local bookstore can't find them for you, you can get ordering information directly from Crowther at crowth1@attglobal.net.

T2: Infiltrator, by S. M. Stirling, HarperCollins, 2001, $25.

S. M. Stirling's continuation of the story James Cameron has been telling in his *Terminator* films picks up right at the end of the second

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movie and carries on from there, full steam ahead. Everything we need for a strong sequel is here. Stirling keeps the action moving, stays true to the characters and their past histories, asks the right questions (and answers them as well), and adds more than a few of his own twists to keep everything fresh and readers on their toes.

One of the best of those twists is how he has the Connors meet up with a retired antiterrorist agent who just happens to be the human blueprint for the Terminators that Skynet will create in the future. Franchise novels aren't necessarily Deep Think books, but they can be fun, especially if you're a fan of the original source material. I'm being hazy on the details of this novel because if you didn't care for the movies, the book won't change your mind. If you did enjoy them, I think you'll be happy with where Stirling has taken the story and will enjoy the surprises.

Stirling's own books are always entertaining, and this excursion of his into franchise-land proves he's just as capable of delivering the goods when playing with somebody else's toys.

Doghouse Roses, by Steve Earle, Houghton Mifflin, 2001, $22.

With this collection, musician Steve Earle proves to be as gripping and evocative a storyteller in prose as he is when he's writing songs. While some of the material is obviously drawn from Earle's own eventful life (the addictions and self-destruction running rampant in the title story, the life of a songwriter in Nashville in "Billy the Kid," the exploration of a state-sanctioned execution in "The Witness"), he also delves into less familiar waters.

"Jaguar Hunter" is a fable of magical realism set against the trade in drugs and illegal aliens along the Mexican/American border. "The Reunion" is set in Ho Chi Minh City and begins with two Vietnam vets from opposite sides of the conflict at odds once more in present time. There are stories set in Paris, in the Appalachians, in Everytown U.S.A., and elsewhere. And unlike what one finds in much contemporary fiction, the voices of the characters here are individual; their lives have meat and depth.

One of the more intriguing pieces for a longtime lover of Earle's music as I am is the prose version of the song "Taneytown" from his CD *El Corazón*, adding a new layer of understanding to what was already a remarkable story.

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To be honest, I was a little wary approaching this book at first. Too many pros in one field fall flat on their faces when they dabble in another. But Earle has the talent to pull it off. He's obviously as committed to his prose as he is to his songwriting, and the result is a book that any lover of good storytelling will appreciate.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

"We don't believe speed was a factor."

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

Immodest Proposals: The Collected Science Fiction of William Tenn, Volume 1, by William Tenn, NESFA Press, 2001, $29.

From These Ashes: The Complete Short SF of Fredric Brown, by Fredric Brown, NESFA Press, 2001, $29.

Dossier, by Stepan Chapman, Creative Arts Book Company, 2001, $13.95.

Stranger Things Happen, by Kelly Link, Small Beer Press, 2001, $16.

Meet Me in the Moon Room, by Ray Vukcevich, Small Beer Press, 2001, $16.

THE SATIRIST always carries two guns. His big service revolver fires bullets of Extrapolation, Cautionary Tale, Irony, Derision, Exaggeration and Raucous Laughter. But it's the little throw-down in the ankle holster that gets you. Just when you think he's out of rounds, he hits you with the Idealism beneath it all.

Phil Klass, traveling not at all incognito under the name of William Tenn, is one of the marvelous generation of sf writers including Heinlein, Asimov, Sturgeon, and Phil Farmer, a generation that, while not inventing the genre, largely codified it. Like rock and rollers in the sixties, they conceived of themselves as half barbarian, half elite; they thought they alone could speak for a world utterly changed, and that their art, in turn, would change the world again for the greater good. Such sense of mission inspires prodigious effort and creativity but can leave a terrible chaff behind once the engine runs down. Mad Ireland hurt Yeats into poetry. Sturgeon only damaged himself into silence. Alfred Bester died from all accounts a bitter man, with one final flamboyant gesture willing his literary estate to the bartender who'd stood by him those last few years.

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But that's youth itself, you say, that urgent sense of mission, that vitality. And surely the final days of Sturgeon and Bester had more to do with failures of character than with genre shortcomings?

"There's something wrong with science fiction as it developed in this country," William Tenn said in a 1975 interview. "There's something particularly shallow, peculiarly tied to the pulps."

Little surprise, then, that Tenn, while regaling us with stories of the glory years, might prove at the same time a bit cantankerous. Like many musicians I know, despairing of that life's difficulty, he's continually giving it up. Till one night he notices fingers drumming in sequence on the table top....

Phil Klass always wanted the barriers down. An earnest advocate of Campbell's *Astounding*, he never read it "for the simple pulpy jazz effects, but for the same reason I read Thomas Mann and André Malraux then, and Jorge Luis Borges and Olaf Stapledon later: it opened up large imaginative vistas and raised questions about where my species was going."

Those busy folk at NESFA now offer, to accompany similar collections of Anthony Boucher, C. M. Kornbluth, Charles Harness and others, this first of two volumes bringing together William Tenn's entire science fiction output. It's a welcome collection, ranging from Tenn's first published story, "Alexander the Bait" (*Astounding*, 1946), through classics such as "The Flat-Eyed Monster" (*Galaxy*, 1955) and "The Liberation of Earth" (*Future Science Fiction*, 1953), to Tenn's sole space opera "Down Among the Dead Men" (*Galaxy*, 1954) and "On Venus, Have We Got a Rabbi," written in 1974 for *Wandering Stars: An Anthology of Jewish Fantasy & Science Fiction*. Thirty-three stories all told, with marvelous afterwords from Tenn and an engaging introduction by Connie Willis. In one of those afterwords, speaking of his inquiry into totalitarianism in "A Man of Family," Tenn remarks on the attraction science fiction has for him: "Only in science fiction could such a fictional investigation be attempted, because only science fiction provides the theater where the character of a society rather than that of an individual can be elaborated."

Lots of poking about in society's cracks here. Lots of great aliens at one and the same time comic and profoundly unsettling. This is classic science fiction at its

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best, stories rivaled only by Avram Davidson and a handful of others, 600-plus pages of William Tenn striding purposefully toward you grinning, ideas in one hand, joy buzzer in the other.

Also out from NESFA is *From These Ashes: The Complete Short SF of Fredric Brown*, another writer to whom ideas are central. Sometimes, as in Brown's trademark short-shorts, the idea's *all* there is, and, as Barry Malzberg points out in his introduction here, people often pass along the "plots" of Brown's stories, his ideas, with no notion of their source.

Like William Tenn, Brown was of that generation of writers that came along in the interregnum between pulps and paperbacks. As with many others, he moved easily between genres, and had he never written a word of science fiction would be well remembered for his battery of fine mysteries such as *The Fabulous Clipjoint* and *The Screaming Mimi*. There were thirty novels in all. I've no idea how many stories. Originally six collections, I believe. Some years back, Dennis McMillan published nineteen volumes of stories culled from the pulps before giving up.

Stories collected here run from 1941 through 1965, including well-known tales like "Etaoin Shrdlu," "Arena," and the brilliant "Come and Go Mad," alongside a bucketful of short-shorts.

Like your champion storyteller at the local pub, Brown is at his best when he has a point to make, and he makes those points with rare economy. Nothing better illustrates this than "The Weapon," his parable of the atomic age, in which an anonymous visitor to the "key scientist of a very important project" leaves a loaded revolver with the scientist's retarded son. Or, alternately, one of his last stories, "Puppet Show," a marvelous piece of writerly sleight-of-hand set in the West where Brown spent his last years, in which no, it's not the weird stick man, nor the grizzled prospector, nor the handsome young fellow into whom the prospector metamorphoses, but the mule that's come as emissary to mankind. "Puppet Show" brings to completion a host of Brown first-contact stories, many of his best among them.

In for the penny and let the pounds be damned, Brown is more stand-up comic than satirist. He's the guy scampering around behind, mugging and doing pratfalls, giving the speaker donkey ears, while the

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professor — or the culture — gives its earnest speech.

A valuable man.

Moving right along, more accurately hopscotching some thirty to sixty years (Don't look down!), we come to *Dossier*, a collection of stories by Philip K. Dick Award-winner Stepan Chapman. These stories, it occurs to me, well might seem to Tenn, Brown, that generation, artifacts of an alien culture. Several appeared not in genre magazines but in literary quarterlies such as the *Chicago Review*. Most are brief, some little more than parables. The science fiction writer I'm most reminded of is David R. Bunch, but in these stories' deliberate irreality, in their firewalled partitioning from *our* world, they strongly recall Tommaso Landolfi.

"All sorts of weird things go on in this town," one begins. "It's not my fault that no one besides me ever notices them.

"Late on any clear autumn night, there are things made of origami that flutter around the street lamps. When the first frost hits town, I find these little paper things dead in the gutters, dozens of them, neatly folded from rice paper."

In another: "Now and again we'll get a tidal wave or a sea monster. But on the whole, life here is uneventful. Which is just how we like it."

Though there *are* stories here, rather grand stories in most cases, epic and elemental, they're carried forward on mood and image as much as narration. Chapman has an uncanny ability to write from inside resolutely *other* worlds, evoking entire characters, chains of thought, whole realms of human experience, in a phrase or paragraph, as in the conclusion to "The Prison of Sod":

> As his last fire burned out, the old hermit stopped breathing.
>
> He had lived his entire life on the frozen wastes inside my brain. Several other hermits like him are living there still. They live far apart and never meet one another. I don't know where they come from, these hermits, or where they go when they die, or what they mean.
>
> But sometimes other people see them behind my eyes and turn away.

Here you'll find Chapman's idiosyncratic takes on heroic fantasy ("The Quest"), primitive myths

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and the fairy tale ("The One-Armed Elek," "At Her Ladyship's Suggestion"), alternate history ("Minutes of the Last Meeting") and alien invasion ("An Example of Ataxia") as well as the Stanislaw Lem-like fable "A Legend of the Wheelgirls."

"Stories can be dangerous," that last one concludes. The one I've been unable to get out of my mind for weeks now.

We've crossed, I suspect, a great divide.

Though they grew up on it, I doubt that it ever occurs to Stepan Chapman, Kelly Link or Ray Vukcevich to ask, Is this science fiction? Or to feel that writing it (when they do) requires justification. Brilliant writers such as Tenn and Brown stormed the gates and broke through; today's young turks are as likely to embrace the influence of Barthelme, Borges, Joanna Russ and Carol Emshwiller, or for that matter Mark Leyner, as of Heinlein and Phil Farmer.

Kelly Link's stories in *Stranger Things Happen* are marvels in the deftness and assurance of their writing as much as in subject matter. They are all about intersections, those corners of consciousness where parallel worlds for whatever reason get bent to contiguity.

"All last week I felt like something was going to happen," one begins, "a sort of bees and ants feeling. Something was going to happen. I taught my classes and came home and went to bed, all week waiting for the thing that was going to happen, and then on Friday I died."

Another:

"'When you're Dead,' Samantha says, 'you don't have to brush your teeth...'

"'When you're Dead,' Claire says, 'you live in a box, and it's always dark, but you're not ever afraid.'

"Claire and Samantha are identical twins. Their combined age is twenty years, four months, and six days. Claire is better at being Dead than Samantha."

Yet, crowded smack up against wonder, there's always the mundane, the unremitting dailyness of our lives: "A few years ago, Jack dropped the c from his name and became Jak. He called me up at breakfast one morning to tell me this. He said he was frying bacon for breakfast and that all his roommates were away. He said that he was walking around stark naked. He could have been telling the truth, I don't know. I could hear something spitting and hissing in the

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background that could have been bacon, or maybe it was just static on the line."

Few writers render the textures of daily life, the terrible entwine of its ordinariness and its marvels, as well as Link.

Often enough, indeed, her stories seem not so much created as somehow dredged up from our inner selves, dimly remembered from dreams, or from childhood perhaps. In a sense, too, they're all ghost stories. For what Link knows is that we are all transients, clinging to the hard surfaces of this world and to our memories in hope not to fade away.

As an admirer of Ray Vukcevich's novel *The Man of Maybe Half-a-Dozen Faces* and with fond memories of stories encountered over the years in *Pulphouse* and various anthologies as well as in these pages, I turned with interest to this initial collection.

That's when the truck hit me.

The whole point of a collection (besides entertaining you, of course, and believe me, that is *not* a problem here) is to demonstrate a writer's range, let you get the full impact of his work in a way that exposure to individual stories over a period of time can't afford.

So here I am, flattened.

And here is Vukcevich on transcendence and the American dream in a story running just over 1000 words:

"In those days, I was a big, bearded, bald guy with an ax, grinding down the boulevard in my '57 Chevy, looking for something pretty to chop.

"These days, a woman who calls me Mary feeds me chocolate chip cookies as I snuggle on the lap of the man who calls me Kitten. The man has his hand on my thigh. We watch TV. I know I've got a milk mustache. I know it looks cute."

Or this episode from the married life as only Vukcevich can disclose it:

"So I come home to find her sitting on the hide-a-bed with this brown paper bag over her head. She hasn't turned on the lights. There are shadows everywhere. I can just make out the name of the grocery store printed in upside-down letters on the front of the bag. She's wearing one of the big bags.

"'What are you doing?' I say.

"'Don't talk to me,' she says."

There are thirty-three stories here, most of them no longer than a few pages, none of them much like anything you've read before, many,

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like "Finally Fruit" or "Whisper" or "Doing Time," profoundly unsettling. On a personal level, returning to it again and again, I find "We Kill a Bicycle" far the strangest and most unsettling of all, though other readers doubtless will elect "Home Remedy" with its tale of a man's thoroughgoing efforts to eliminate the roaches living inside his head. Included, by the way, in "Rejoice," are some of the worst puns and most shamelessly nonsequitur literary allusions ever put to paper.

These are funny, savage stories, all flint and steel, scraps of flannel, pratfalls and prideful weirdness, sparks falling away into darkness.

"Stories can be dangerous," Chapman wrote. Yes they can, and should, be. And in the case of all the writers covered here, indisputably are.

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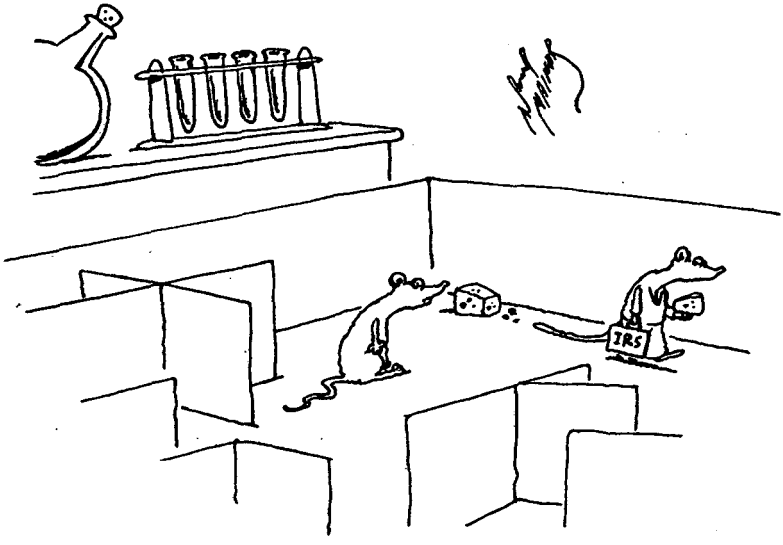

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One of the modern masters of fantastic literature, Gene Wolfe has been challenging and rewarding readers for thirty-odd years with his well-crafted, subtle tales. His last such gift to us was "In Glory Like Their Star" in our October issue; now he brings us a poignant gem of a story.

The Waif

By Gene Wolfe

THE SOFT SIGH OF BREATH might have come from a puppy, and Bin hoped it did. Quietly, hoping that it was a sleeping puppy and not a piglet (though he would very willingly have petted a piglet), he went to see, the heavy stick forgotten in his hands.

It was a boy, sound asleep on straw, and covered with more straw and feed sacks. The boy's face was white, and so delicate it might almost have been a girl's; his hair was as black as a crow's wing. Bin stood watching him for a long time, feeling something he could put no name to. He had never had a friend. Fil and Gid were not really his friends, but he had not known that.

At length he turned over a bucket and sat on it. That was the way you got the rats to come out, you just waited, real still, not hardly breathing, till they thought you had gone; but the other boy's breath made faint plumes of steam, and Bin's big, greasy coat with the wool on the inside did not keep him warm enough. He found an old shingle and a bent nail, and printed: IF YOU HUNGRY COME MY HOUSE LATE WHISTLE BY WINDOW. On the other side: LITTLE ONE WEST NO ROAD.

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Propping up the shingle near the sleeping boy, where he would be sure to see it, Bin tiptoed to the door. Niman Corin was nowhere in sight, and that was good. Niman Joel's punishments for trespassing had been light; but they had burned Niman Joel, and who could say what Niman Corin might do? It was better not to be whacked at all.

Supper had been bread and soup, as it nearly always was. Bin lay in bed listening to Gam's wheezing inhalations and speculating on the difficulties of giving the other boy soup. The bowl and spoon would have to be returned. There could be no getting around that. Could he trust the other boy to do it?

Everyone had trusted Niman Joel, even the grownups.

He should have gone to see the reverend, after, like Gam said. He had not, had lied about it. Gam had put his finger on the stove, not for lying but just so he would know how burning felt. He had been punished for the lie, even if Gam had believed him. That was something to remember.

To remember always.

Outside a saw-whet called, probably from the big pine at the edge of the woods.

It would have been better to have gone to the reverend. The reverend would have said what Fil had said, that Niman Joel had been punished on Earth and was in heaven now and all that. But it would have been better to have gone. One lie, and you have to watch everything you say forever.

But Gid had not been lying when he said he had killed that rat. He had showed it, almost as big as a cat. Or he had been, because somebody else had killed it, maybe. It had been poisoned or something.

The saw-whet cried again, a little nearer this time, like on a fence post. The mice would not come out in this cold, they had already come into Gam's house to keep warm. As he had.

Gam had caught two in her trap, and one had drowned trying to drink out of the scrub bucket. Cats were no good, Gam said. When an old lady like her had a cat, folks said she talked to the Flying People. Maybe helped them like Niman Joel.

The saw-whet was perched on the chimney, probably. Its shrill whistle came again, and Bin sat up, threw off quilt and blanket, and sprang from his bed.

A shadowy figure waiting outside in the snow beyond the window.

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Bin pushed his feet into his boots, snatched up his coat and what remained of the bread, and hurried outside.

"Aren't you cold?" he asked the boy waiting in the snow. The moon was bright, and it seemed to him that the other boy was dressed in rags, and thin rags at that.

"Very cold." When the other boy took the bread his hand shook. "Can't I come inside? Please?"

Bin shook his head.

"I could eat this in front of the fire, and warm myself. Just for a moment."

"You'd wake Gam. She'd be mad."

The other boy chewed and swallowed. "I wouldn't, but suppose I did. Hasn't she ever been angry before?"

"Sure. Lots."

"Was it worse than my freezing to death?"

In the cabin, the other boy crouched in the ashes and ate the bread while Bin brought him a bowl of soup. There was still a little fire in the stove, banked for breakfast, so the soup was warm. "There isn't any meat," Bin explained, "'cause we don't have any. It's just carrots and potatoes, mostly."

"It smells wonderful."

While the other boy was eating his soup, Bin said, "You'll have to go out when that's finished."

The other boy looked up, smiling. "Then I won't eat so fast. It's wonderful to be warm."

"You could build a fire in the woods."

The other boy said nothing, eating soup.

"Does Niman Corin know you sleep in his new barn?"

The other boy's shoulders rose and fell. "I suppose. Some of them do."

"They let you?"

The other boy dipped what was left of his bread into his soup and ate it. "Not exactly, but they know I'm there sometimes."

"What's your name?"

"They call me the Cold Lad." The other boy smiled. "But that's not really my name. My name is Ariael."

"Mine's Bin."

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Bin had smiled too when he spoke, but the other boy's smile faded. "What are you going to do when I leave, Bin?"

"I guess go back to bed."

"I'm tired, too. Probably more tired than you are." The other boy spooned up the last of his soup and drank it. "I want you to let me hide in here, where it's warm. Gam won't find me. Will you do that?"

"You don't have no boots?" Bin was looking at the other boy's bare feet; one had been bleeding, and the blood was caked with ashes now.

"No. None."

"Gam bought me these." Bin indicated his own boots, sheepskin boots with thick wooden soles. "They're big so I can wear 'em next year too."

The other boy said nothing.

"I guess I could give you one."

The other boy grinned and hugged him, which surprised him very much indeed. "I won't take it," he whispered.

He let Bin go.

"But, Bin, think how Gam would feel if you gave me a boot. You'd have to say you lost it, and she'd be terribly hurt."

"I guess."

"So instead of giving me one of your boots, I want you to do something much easier. I want you to let me hide in bed with you. I won't take up much room, and I'll get down under the covers so Gam won't see me. Watch."

Handing Bin his bowl and spoon, the other boy ran soundlessly to Bin's bed and slipped beneath the old quilt. The quilt rose — or so it seemed to Bin, watching it by firelight. For a moment or two it twitched and settled itself.

After that it seemed clear that the other boy had gone. Thinking about it, Bin decided that the other boy had slipped over to the side of the bed and slid over the edge, and was hiding under it. He took off his coat and hung it on the peg, pulled off his boots, stood them at the foot of his bed the way Gam liked, and got under the covers. The other boy was in there, too, small and thin and very cold. He huddled against Bin for warmth, and Bin found that he was no longer little, as he had been all his life. He was someone large and warm, someone strong, generous, and protecting. It felt good, but it felt serious too.

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* * *

The other boy was still there when he got out of bed in the morning. He washed the way he always did, trying not to look, got dressed, and went outside to cut a twig to clean his teeth the way you were supposed to.

When he came back in, Gam said, "Cold out?"

"Pretty cold."

"There was bread left last night. It was going to be our breakfast."

"I'll be late for school," Bin told her.

"You ate it, didn't you, Bin? You got up in the night and ate it."

"Yes'm."

"Don't cry. It wasn't no sin."

Gam held him for a minute. She was warm and smelled bad and he loved her.

"There's soup left for me, and I'll bake more bread, if I can get salt. It'll be spring real soon now, Bin, and things will be easier."

Gam had been right, Bin decided as he walked to school. Yes, it was still cold. Yes, there was still snow on the ground, a lot of it. But there was something new in the air, something that made him think of the other boy, a promise not in words. He had straightened up his bed because Gam had made him, and it had seemed like there was nothing in that bed, nothing at all. Or only the promise.

The other boy could whistle like a saw-whet. He himself could whistle like a wren, and he did as he walked to school, then fell silent as he clattered up the rickety wooden steps and shuffled into the long gloomy room with sheets of scarred wood for walls.

When the schoolmaster arrived, Bin rose with the others to greet him. "*Good morning, Niman Pryderi!*"

"Good morning, class. I trust you had a good holiday?"

Several nodded.

"You did not go to see Niman Joel burned?"

Bin, who had, said nothing.

"What about you, Shula?"

Shula had been toying nervously with one of her skinny braids; she let it fall as she spoke. "I didn't go, Niman Pryderi. I didn't want to."

"That is well. Fil?"

Fil sat up straight. "Yes, sir. I went. I felt like I ought to see it."

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"That is well, too." The schoolmaster rose, selected a stick from the woodbox, opened the door of the stove, poked the fire with it, and tossed it in to burn. The sky around the hole in the weathered aluminum roof was bright blue. As he had often before, Bin stared at it, sick for the freedom temporarily denied him.

"Do you understand why I said that, class? I said it was good that Shula didn't want to watch Niman Joel burned, and good that Fil felt he should. Who will explain that? Bin?"

He rose as slowly as he could, his mind racing. "'Cause boys 'n girls are different?"

"They are, of course, but that's not the reason." Hands were up. The schoolmaster said, "Dionne?"

She stood, taller and wider than anyone else in the class, and ever-defiant. "You said it was good that Fil watched, because we ought to know about it — about what happens to people that get mixed up with the Flying People. But we shouldn't *want* to watch it, because it was horrible. Nobody ought to want to see somebody else burned to death. That's sick."

"Excellent, Dionne."

Bin, who never raised his hand, had raised it now. For a moment the schoolmaster looked at it in surprise. Then he said, "Yes, Bin. What is it?"

He rose again, as slowly as ever. "I — I...."

The schoolmaster thought he understood, and said, "You were there, too. With Fil, I imagine."

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir, I was. I seen it. Only — only if we don't want to see it, we could just not do it. Folks do it, Niman Pryderi. It don't just happen."

There was laughter. Some light object struck the back of his head, and he sat down.

"We have lost a world," the schoolmaster explained almost gently, "and it was the only world we had. All our nations collapsed as our raw materials were exhausted, Bin, and no sooner had we begun to rebuild than the Flying People arrived."

The class was satisfied and seemed ready to move on, but the schoolmaster was not. He went to his desk, sat down, and regarded them, his soft, dark eyes traveling from face to face. "Their presence prevents us from rebuilding it. How can we bring back the science we lost, when we

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know that human beings not much different from ourselves are watching all we do, and our lost science is child's play to them?"

He paused. "That was a rhetorical question. Do you know what a rhetorical question is?"

About half the class nodded.

"It's a question we ask because it cannot be answered, or because the answer is so obvious that no one needs to say it. In this case, the answer is that we can't. You may say that our shame, embarrassment, and humiliation ought not to prevent us from doing what we should. If you won't say it, I will. I do. But the fact is that we are so prevented. It's why so many of you have only one pair of shoes, and less than enough to eat. That's why you have to go to school in an old truck. Burning our neighbors is horrible, very horrible indeed. But having neighbors who would side with the Flying People is intolerable — which means that we do not tolerate it."

Dionne approached Bin at recess; and Bin, who was terrified of her, tried to back away.

She smiled. "I just wanted to say I never knew what a good little kid you are. They pick on you sometimes, don't they?"

He shrugged. "They make fun. Gam 'n me's poor."

"Yeah. Let me tell you a secret." She bent, her mouth at his ear. "We all are."

Bin had not yet recovered his emotional balance when Fil took him aside. "Look, Bin, somebody's gotta tell you this, so I guess it's me. What you said in class? You know what I mean?"

He nodded.

"There's a dozen kids that will tell their folks, all right? What happened to Niman Joel could happen to you. It don't take much. You keep your mouth shut from now on. Or you say he got what he had comin'. You say, show me another one and I'll bring the wood. Understand?"

"It was dumb," Bin said. "I know that."

"It was dumb, and if you keep on like that I won't know you anymore, understand? You're going to be too risky to know, so you shut up."

Bin joined the kickball game, and scored. Fil slapped his back, but none of the others said anything. As soon as the game had resumed, a big hand grasped his shoulder. "Come in," the schoolmaster said. "I must speak with you."

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Docilely, Bin followed him back into the school.

"Sit down. You can pull up that stool. We're not going to stand on formality until your classmates return." The schoolmaster's smile was touched with bitterness.

Bin did as he was told. "I guess I know what this is about, Niman Pryderi. I'm sorry."

"I doubt that you do, Bin — though I've no doubt that you're sorry. Do you know why I'm called Niman, Bin? Or why Niman Joel was, or any other man?"

Bin shook his head.

"When the Flying People came, we started calling each other Neighbor. Neighbor meant that a man was one of us, and not one of them. Then we wanted to burn our neighbors." The bitter smile returned. "Which our religion — some people's religion, at least — teaches us we should not do. So we changed it to Near-man, then to Niman. It wasn't all that long ago. About the time I was born."

Bin nodded again.

"Have I ever used my switch on you, Bin?"

"Last year." Bin gulped. "For talkin' in class."

"I'm going to do it again, when class resumes. I am going to make the dust fly. Did you cry, last year?"

"A little, Niman Pryderi."

"Are you going to cry this time?"

Bin shook his head. "I'm bigger."

"You will cry, this time," the schoolmaster told him. "You'll scream. When class resumes, I'm going to ask you questions, and they will be questions you can't answer. I'll see to that. Then I'll bend you over my desk and whale away. It will hurt and you'll cry, but the boys who are ready to league against you will like you after that. And the girls will talk about how you were beaten when they go home this afternoon, not about what you said. Do you understand?"

"I think so, Niman Pryderi."

The schoolmaster's voice softened. "Guilt is the worst part, Bin. Knowing that we were on the devil's side, and that what we got was less than we deserved. I want to spare you that. You've done nothing wrong. Have you ever raked something out of the fire with a stick?"

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Bin nodded.

"That's what I'll be doing, with my switch. Remember that."

GAM SAW the tracks the tears had left down a face not particularly clean and said, "What happened?" and hugged him, and he ate his supper standing up. There was fresh bread for supper, and to divert him from his sufferings she told him about the salt some kind neighbor had surely left for them, a nice big sack of clean white salt just sitting there on the doorstep when she had gone to the well. "Spring was in the air, Bin. I guess you noticed, too, when you children went outside to play? I was thinking about it, it felt so nice, and I turned around and carry my bucket back in, and there it was, sitting on the step."

By a great effort of will, Bin succeeded in not looking at his bed; it seemed likely the other boy would not have gone to bed so early anyway. He would want some of the new bread after Gam had gone to sleep, Bin decided, and he had earned it, too.

"You want to study your book now?"

He shook his head. "I'm goin' out to play. It'll be dark soon. I'll study then."

"You got switched for not knowing the answers, Bin. You know them now?"

"That's why I'd like you to help me study when I come back."

Once outside, he found his stick and made straight for the barn that had been Niman Joel's. There was still snow on the ground here and there, and ice that cracked beneath the hard wooden soles of his boots; but there was water, as well, puddles to splash in, and cold drippings that fell from the eaves of the barn onto his head and down the back of his neck, finding their way inside the greasy wool and the old gray shirt.

Most of all, there was the new-year feeling in the air, as Gam had said. It would be kite-flying time before long, and the first kite-flying time in which he was not youngest flier. Emlyn and Cu and Sid would look to him for help with their kites, just as —

Footsteps. He froze.

It was Gid; Bin relaxed a little.

Gid looked around. "Bin? Bin, I know you're in here. Where are you?"

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Bin stepped forward. "Here I am. I thought maybe I could kill a big rat, Gid, like you did. So I stayed real quiet."

"This's our barn now."

Bin nodded.

"We don't want nobody thinkin' it don't belong to nobody. It's ours."

Bin nodded again.

"Niman Joel's dead, and his wife's run out. So we took his place for what he owed. Who you got with you?"

"Nobody." The question had taken Bin by surprise.

"Yes, you do. I seen you comin' across our new field."

"I did," Bin admitted, "only there wasn't nobody with me."

"I seen him." Gid stepped nearer — larger, older, and stronger. "You better tell me, an' I mean now."

Bin resorted to logic. "If there was anybody, he'd be in here."

Gid's fist struck him under the left eye, and he yelped with pain, backing away.

"Don't you yell when I hit you!" Gid waded in, fists flying, and Bin fell. The kicks were worse — much worse — than the blows of Gid's fists.

And then the heavy stick Bin had brought to kill rats was above Gid's head. It came down hard with a noise like a sack of feed dropped from high up, catching Gid where his neck joined his shoulder. Gid swung around, and it hit his forehead with the sound of a hammer pounding a board, and he fell.

The stick fell too; for an instant, Bin caught sight of the other boy in the dimness of the barn. Then he was gone.

So was Bin, taking his stick with him, as soon as he could get to his feet. The wood was not a comfortable place in weather like this, full of ice and water, with snow-water dripping from every tree; but it was a familiar place, and he remembered the saw-whet. If the other boy had come here one time, he might come here again.

"Hello, Bin."

Bin whirled, and found the other boy behind him. "That was good," Bin said with solemn sincerity, "what you done for me. I owe you."

The other boy smiled. "Owe me what? A pair of boots like yours?"

"Sure! Lemme find a place to set, 'n I'll take 'em off."

The other boy shook his head. "I don't want them, Bin. They're too

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heavy for me. I was testing you, and I shouldn't do that. I won't, ever again."

"Then I won't test you, neither."

"Good. Why did you go into that barn? Were you looking for me?"

Bin nodded. "About school. The salt, too. It was right of you, 'n I wanted to say I'd give some a' the bread tonight. You goin' to be in my bed again?"

"If you don't object."

"Then I could a' said there, only I didn't know."

"You wanted to tell me something about your school, too."

"Yeah." Bin ran his fingers through his unruly hair, spat, and ran his fingers through his hair again. "'Bout school 'n Niman Joel. All that. They said how bad it was to burn him. It didn't seem so bad to me when they was doin' it. Everybody was yellin' 'n carryin' on. I was, too."

"I understand, Bin, and I don't blame you."

"'Course I couldn't see much. I said I did, after, only it was a lie. I seen a little, but they was crowdin' around the fire too close."

He waited for some comment from the other boy, but none came.

"So then today in school they said how bad it was, burnin' a neighbor like that, 'n I said why do it if you don't like to? 'N I got warmed for it pretty good. Just for sayin' that. He said it wasn't for that, only it was. So I got to wonderin' what Niman Joel done, you know? The Flyin' People's rich, they say, 'n whatever they say, why that's got to go. Fil said he most likely told on them that talked against 'em, only everybody does, 'n they got to know that. So what'd he do? 'N I remembered you used to sleep in his barn, sometimes anyhow, so maybe you'd know."

"He was very poor," the other boy said.

Bin nodded. "He didn't have but the one mule. I know that."

"Hatred is a luxury, Bin. Like whiskey. Do you know about whiskey?"

"Sure."

"People who have good farms make it and drink it, and for the most part it does them little harm. But those who are truly poor must choose between whiskey and food, and if they choose whiskey they die. Hatred is like that. Niman Joel had to devote all his energy to feeding himself and his family. He carved spoons and bowls and pannikins in winter, and sold

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them, though he got very little for them. From spring until fall he worked from sunrise to sunset, trying to grow enough food, and hay enough to carry his mule through the winter. I tried to help him now and then, and sometimes I succeeded."

"That's good."

"I think myself very rich, Bin. You may not believe me, but I do. This whole, beautiful world of yours lies open before me. I can go wherever I want to, and do whatever I want to. I watch the sun go down, and I watch the moon come up. Its mountains and its seas are all mine. I can see them and play on them anytime I want, and I wish that I could show them to you as well."

"Did you show him?"

Sadly, the other boy shook his head. "I couldn't. But I helped him sometimes, as I said, and as I said, he was too poor to hate. He didn't hate — he couldn't afford to, and I think that the others must have seen that. I tried — "

"Wait up!" Bin made an urgent gesture. "You're one?"

"Would you hate me, Bin? If you thought I was?"

"Sure!"

"Then I am not, because I know you can't afford it. I'm cold, and you're cold, too. I can see you are. I think we both ought to go inside and warm ourselves before Gam's fire. You promised her you'd study tonight, and she was going to help you. Remember?"

"You better not let her see you," Bin said as he turned away. "She'll have a fit."

Behind him, the other boy said, "*She won't see me, Bin. I promise you.*" Bin had the feeling that if he turned around he would not see the other boy either.

GAM HAD FINISHED washing up and was waiting for him inside, with Bin's tattered little arithmetic book on her lap. They had finished with IF JON HAS FIVE APPLES, JORI HAS FOUR APPLES AND JAK HAS THREE APPLES, HOW MANY APPLES DO THE BOYS HAVE? And were starting on IT IS FOUR O'CLOCK AND OTO WANTS TO SLED when someone knocked. Bin opened the door and Niman Corin came in without asking, with Gid behind him. "Another

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boy hit my son with a stick," Niman Corin told Gam. "He was playing with your grandson, and this other boy came up behind him and hit him." He looked around at Gid, who nodded.

"I'm sorry to hear," Gam said politely. "I hope he's not hurt bad."

"He saw that boy go in here with your grandson." Niman Corin did not bother looking around this time. "Didn't you, Gid?"

"Yes, sir," Gid said.

Gam shook her head. "Bin came in to study a bit ago, but there wasn't anybody with him. Were you playing with somebody outside, Bin?"

Bin said, "Yes'm."

"Who with?"

"Him. Gid."

Gam looked severe. "You didn't hit him with any stick, I hope, Bin."

"No, ma'am. I never." Privately Bin considered that it might be nice to hit Gid with a stick in the future.

"Did anybody?"

"Yes, ma'am. This one boy did."

Niman Corin aimed a thick forefinger at Bin. "A boy that was playing with you and Gid?"

"No, sir, Niman Corin. He just come up behind Gid 'n whapped him. I never seen he's there till he done it."

Niman Corin looked angrier than ever. "What's his name?"

Bin strove to remember, hoping he could not. "I don't know. He told me once, only I forget."

"Does he live around here?"

"I don't know, Niman Corin. I don't think so."

Gam cleared her throat, the sound of a woman with much of import to say. "It's four o'clock and Oto wants to sled. If it takes half an hour to walk to the hill, and Oto must be home for supper by six, how long will he have to sled?"

"Why, you old bitch!" Niman Corin glared at her.

She looked up from Bin's arithmetic. "You take that back."

Niman Corin's face, red already, grew redder still. "You look at my son's head."

"I've seen it," Gam declared. "Now I want you to look at Bin's bottom. Take off your trousers, Bin."

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Bin did not.

"He was switched for not getting his lessons," Gam explained, "beat harder than a lot would beat a mule. I'm sure Niman Pryderi had reason, but I don't like it. I'm going to see to it he's never switched so bad again. Now you take back what you said or you clear out of my house."

Gid said, "He's hidin' in here, Pa. I seen him come in." He lay down to look under Gam's bed.

Bin had been thinking about the other boy, and not about Oto. He said, "Two hours?"

Gam stood up and closed the arithmetic. "You listen here," she told Niman Corin. "I don't give a rap for what your Gid thinks he seen. I was sitting right there when Bin came in, and there wasn't nobody with him. You've came in my house and called me a name that will stand between us when these boys are grown men. You get out."

"I've been a friend to you," Niman Corin told her.

"Not so I've noticed. Get out!"

He left, and Gid left with him after looking under Bin's bed, and after that Gam began to cry.

Shula's mother stopped Bin on the way to school. "I see you've got a new boy living in your house, Bin. What's his name?"

"There isn't none," Bin told her, and knew he lied.

"I saw your grandma going to market yesterday," Shula's mother insisted, "and there was a little boy with her. It wasn't you."

Bin shrugged.

"I come up to talk, and he wasn't there anymore. It was like he'd just flown away."

After recess, Shula herself told the schoolmaster, "Bin was talkin' to some boy that don't go to our school. I seen them way over by the trees." Nor was that the only such report.

They found Bin in the woods one day when the first bold trees had donned their spring green. Niman Adken caught him by one arm and, when he tried to pull away, Niman Corin by the other; and they walked him back to town, saying hardly a word between them. The stake was being driven in as they got there, Niman Torn with a sledge and Niman

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Rasmos with a maul, so the sounds of the blows they struck (standing in a wagon and pounding down the stake until it stood no taller than a man) differed: *Bang! Bam! Bang! Bam! Bang! Bam!* On and on.

They kept Bin there while the wood was unloaded from another wagon, and when Niman Smit and Niman Kruk brought a bottle of kero. There were other boys watching by then, shouting to each other just as he had shouted when Niman Joel had burned, and helping unload wood. But Bin did not shout, and could not have helped unload, because Niman Adken had his left arm, and Niman Corin his right. And when the grownups chased the boys and crowded them out so they themselves could see better, Bin was not chased and not crowded at all. He stood way up front instead, where he could see everything that was being done, and they would not let him go.

He thought then of the game in the wood, and how he would hide in the hollow log next time where the other boy would never be able to find him; but he knew that there were never be a next time, not really, and the other boy had flown into the leaves up above, and through the leaves, and up into the sky when Niman Adken and Niman Corin had come, working hard to do it even if he had no wings that you could see. They would never play together in the woods anymore, or sit in front of the fire hearing stories, or huddle together under the old quilt and the blanket on cold nights. No, never.

Then Niman Adken bent down and sort of whispered, "Maybe it'd be better if you shut your eyes," and some men brought Gam with her hands tied and a rope around her neck like a dog would have; and they took it off and tied her to the stake with it, and everybody threw wood and some of it hit her, and Niman Smit and Niman Kruk poured their kero on it.

Niman Lipa puffed his cigar hard after that, and when it was going good he lit a rag tied on a stick from it; and the reverend came and went right up to Gam like he was going to cut her loose and talked to her, and she talked back, and he nodded a lot and gave her a tract to hold. But he never cut her loose, and when he went away he walked like he was never coming back, right through everybody that was watching, and on out. Niman Lipa puffed again and lit another rag on another stick (or maybe the same one, if he had put the first one out) and threw it. And the kero caught pretty slow, but it caught, the fire jumping up and dying down, and fire got

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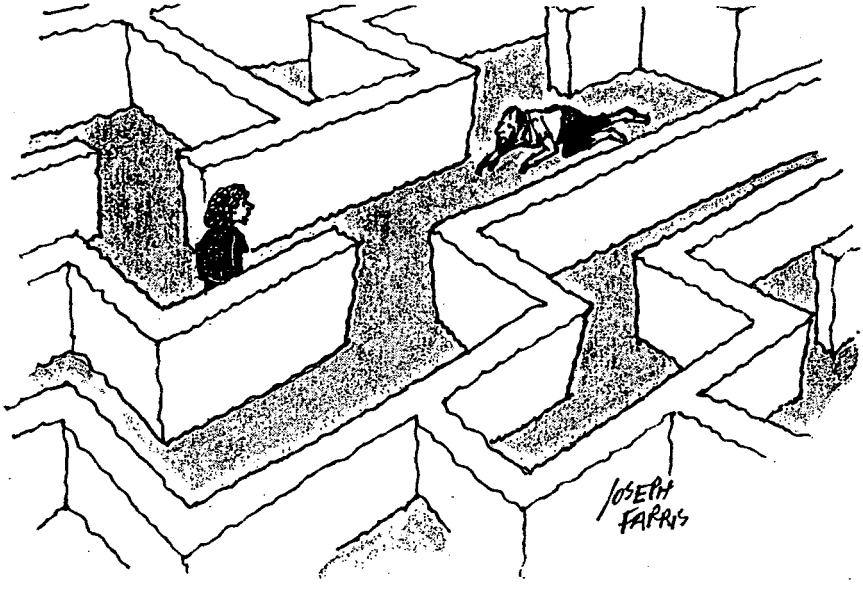
into the wood too, just little flames here and there, only it was wood burning and you could smell it through the smell of kero, bright little tongues of yellow flame climbing up the pile closer to Gam all the time.

Bin yelled for somebody to help her, and Niman Adken and Niman Corin held him tighter, and he saw Fil between a couple grownups, and Fil was not yelling and did not look happy or sad or anything, just watching. He wiggled out of his coat then and ran up onto the wood and stamped the little flames. And it was funny, but nobody came to catch him. Nobody.

The fire got bigger anyway, and Bin stamped as fast as he could and yelled, "They're nicer 'n we are! They really are nicer! *You don't know!*"

Slowly at first — a few big drops — then harder and harder, it began to rain.



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James Stoddard lives in Lubbock, Texas, and works as an instructor in music recording and engineering. He is the author of two novels, The High House *(which won the Compton Crook Award) and* The False House, *both of which have recently been reprinted in hardcover editions. He has a Web site at* www.sff.net/people/james-stoddard.

"The Star Watch" is set in the same universe as his two novels, but you needn't have read them to enjoy this imaginative tale. Mr. Stoddard would like to thank Howard Fisher and the S.A.I.L. writers' group for their invaluable critiques.

The Star Watch

By James Stoddard

For my part I know nothing with any certainty, but the sight of the stars makes me dream...

—van Gogh

I WAS SIXTEEN WHEN I CAME to the Tower of Astronomy in the great house, Evenmere, and there is no place I would rather have been. Because of this, I was a tremendous disappointment to my father, who farmed on the great Terraces. The earth between his hands and a son to carry on the tradition was all he ever wanted. I, myself, found the work tedious. I listened to his discussions of rain and beetles and warm sunshine on green leaves — our household was full of such talk — but I would not hear. The earth did not move me, for I wanted the stars.

The stars! I would stand in my father's fields at night and stare up at the sky. I knew all the constellations and the individual names of many points of light. The sight of them left me aching with a nameless yearning, for in my mind they lit the path to all the mysteries of the universe, being somehow connected to God.

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When I turned twelve, I sent a letter to the Grand Astronomer, and to my wonder, he replied. I asked foolish questions, but he answered them all. Thereafter I wrote him four times each year. He was kind, and once sent me a star chart etched by his own hand. I nailed it to my wall and stared at it for hours.

At the beginning of my sixteenth year I petitioned to apprentice in the Astronomy Tower for a summer, to see if I possessed the necessary qualities for the work. I was nearly overcome with delight when the Astronomer gave his permission.

I will never forget the look on my father's face the day I left. Both my parents sought to reason with me, he talking of the long summer's work to be done and of how the land would all be mine some day; she saying how much it would mean to Father if I stayed. I paid no heed, for all I could think of were the stars. And because my father was a gentle man, he said no more on the day of my departure, but clasped his arms around me in a husky embrace. He smelled of warm earth and sweat, and that is the way I always remember him.

"You will come back," he said. "The earth will draw you home. It is in your blood. You must be careful. They say the Towers are tall; do not be falling from them." Though he spoke bravely, his eyes were filled with a sorrow that I, at my young age, did not comprehend. How strange that we can look into the past and see events more clearly than we could at the moment they occurred.

I walked the long corridors of Evenmere, down gas-lit passages of floral carpets, dark oak wainscotting, frescoed ceilings and flying buttresses carved with apostles and angels. This being my first time away from home, I marveled at the endless variety of the enormous mansion and considered all the scholars said concerning it: that it is God's mechanism for maintaining the universe; that its clocks must be kept wound and its candles lit lest time and the stars run down like children's toys; that it is a symbolic representation of all the universe — a thousand such stories crowded my mind, many completely contradictory. Having grown up within Evenmere's halls, I had taken its strangeness for granted; only by traveling through it did I finally glimpse its mystery and majesty.

I passed through the passages of Cosing and into Aylyrium, a country of towering domes and silver-splendored mosaics, with long, sweeping

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hallways and immense, majestic statues. After seeking directions from the inhabitants, I found my way up the winding stair leading to the Tower, where I entered a circular chamber draped in floral rugs, with Morris tapestries of peacocks on acanthus backgrounds concealing brick and mortar walls. A fireplace curved along one side surrounded by desks, end tables, and fat chairs with threadbare arms. Plaster angels stared down with hollow eyes from the cornices, as if in judgment of me.

There, I met the Astronomer, a rotund gentleman of great age. He had a warm, honest face, and as was the custom of all who worked in the Tower, wore a white robe with a heavy hood. By his side stood a young man only slightly older than myself, whose gray robe loomed so large it nearly swallowed him, leaving his face peeking out as if from a stone crag.

"Edwin," the Astronomer addressed me. "This is Forth, my son. He knows much of the stars and will be Grand Astronomer after me."

Forth grimaced at his father's words. He was dark-haired with brooding green eyes. I suppose he might have been handsome, had his nose not been broken more than once. He walked with a slight limp as well, I assumed from some accident.

The Astronomer guided me to the Mechanical Room above the circular chamber, but Forth, begging other duties, did not accompany us.

The chamber, or actually, series of chambers, was the beginning of wonder for me, a world of levers and dials, gauges and gears, whole apparatus of which I had no specific understanding, though I knew their ultimate purpose.

The Astronomer uses them to regulate the stars.

From telescopes of every size around the chamber, the Grand Astronomer watches the heavens. The uninformed believe he actually keeps the stars in their courses. Of course, this is gross superstition. No man, even with the number of assistants employed by the Tower, could watch every star. Rather, his duties are to monitor the heavens and set right that which can be set right. Some tasks are within his power, others are not.

As we stood in that room, he lectured in his pleasant, patient voice about the working of the brass controls, but after the passing of an hour I could withhold my eagerness no more and interrupted by blurting, "Please, sir, may I see the Nine Towers?"

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He smiled at this, with an understanding that told me he, too, remembered being young.

"This way then, my friend. I forget how dreary it is to a swift, new mind, dwelling too long upon a single topic. The Nine are best seen from the Central Tower."

He led me through a heavy oak door along a narrow stairway winding itself up and up. We passed several doors, but at last exited into another circular chamber, with polished wood floors, oriental rugs, and a garrison of fainting couches, chairs, and side tables heavy with knickknacks. Paintings covered nearly every inch of the walls in Victorian style. I thought that a shame, for the walls, being curved burlwood, seemed too beautiful to conceal. Seven double windows wrapped in floral curtains stood at identical intervals around the room. The Astronomer strode to the first of these, threw the curtains back with a flourish, unlatched the window, and pulled it open.

"Come see," he said, gesturing to me.

I drew near and froze in amazement. Nothing I had read, nothing my mentor had told me, could have prepared me. Outside the window three towers were visible, reaching high into a sky black as deepest space. Around those towers hung the stars.

Red, blue, yellow, green — such names give no justice to their hues. In appearance, their size varied from that of a child's ball to seething orbs larger than the chamber in which I stood, all suspended around the towers like inset gems. The sparkling pearls of the Milky Way shimmered in a net across the highest spires, and stars hung beneath us as well, as if the Earth had vanished, leaving only the towers and the celestial lights.

There is no certain explanation for it. From our observation point I should have seen blue sky, not the black velvet of space. And how can stars revolving in their massive orbits also be jeweled ornaments on the Nine Towers? But Evenmere is a strange house, as I have said.

Regardless, I stood mesmerized, scarcely able to catch my breath, for here at last hung the objects of my yearning, I like a lover within reach of his beloved, paralyzed in awe before the beauty of her soul.

So I came to live and work in the Tower of Astronomy. Of all the scores of assistants the Astronomer employed I was the youngest, the rest,

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save for Forth, being ten years my senior. Most lived outside the Tower, and with these I formed no friendships.

Forth proved a poor companion. At first I thought we would be confederates, but when I tried to speak of the stars, he showed an astonishing lack of interest for one destined to be Grand Astronomer. In fact, he scarcely spoke at all on any subject and his expression remained perpetually morose.

I used to walk the stairs of the Towers at night. I can never forget those early days: the creaking of the floorboards, the smell of wood and carpet, the smell of *stars*! Others have scoffed at me for this, but I swear I smell them, acrid and hot, sweet with burning blazes. It was the best time of my life — to cross a room and look out, to see the stars suspended. Oh, how I loved that place!

My duties proved both interesting and dull, for though they often varied, I was sometimes required to spend long hours alone monitoring the various instruments. Because of my enthusiasm, the Astronomer took greater interest in me than in any of my fellow workers. In this, he may have erred by demonstrating procedures earlier than was customary: it is easy to equate a quick mind with wisdom; I had the first but lacked the second.

Many times he assigned me a star to monitor. And though the vigil might last long hours, I remained diligent, observing until the luminary reached a predetermined location in the heavens, when I would call the Grand Astronomer to manipulate the brass levers and knobs in ways beyond my understanding. Despite my ignorance, I watched carefully, and even in those early days, began to suspect more art than science in the work.

BECAUSE FORTH and I were his favorites, the Astronomer often paired us together. At first, I thought this an opportunity to learn, until Forth's father began depicting me as a model to his son. Whether this was done intentionally or otherwise, it did little to improve Forth's attitude toward me.

"The Star Watch," the Astronomer often said, "is like fishing. Have neither of you been fishing? Of course you have! It is a matter of finding

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the proper water, whether the still pool or the running stream, of trimming the line, setting the bait, making the cast. It is discovering the proper currents and watching the cork bob, then the moment of the nip, the taking of the bait, the struggle — the tightening and loosening — the bringing of the quarry to the shore. Such is the Star Watch. I do not simply observe the instruments; I sense the powers at work; I listen for the ebb and flow of the star tides, discern the rushing solar winds, and perceive the slow, grinding orbits of the suns."

This was useful instruction, but he often added such remarks as, "Edwin, I see in you the Gift of Astronomy. I notice the way the movement of the stars fascinates — you understand the art. Forth, you must benefit from Edwin's example. Learn to be the patient fisherman. Only then will you become a great Astronomer."

But Forth was not patient; his thoughts rippled constantly across his brow. And at his father's words, he glared at me. Certainly it did not help that I was the younger. At those times, I believe he hated me.

There came a day when Forth's father assigned us to the Middle Reaches of the Sixth Tower. "You are proceeding well," he told us. "I never allow apprentices your age to ascend beyond the first levels, but between the two of you, you will perform splendidly. There is a pair of stars in Centaurus requiring minor adjustments."

He led us down several corridors, then up the circular stair of the Sixth Tower. On such excursions, the rotund Astronomer proved remarkably robust, for in the hour we climbed Forth and I required frequent rests, but he never seemed to tire.

As we ascended, the stars outside the windows grew nearer. My heart raced, not merely from exertion but excitement, as I imagined drawing close enough to warm my hands against their heat, to reach out and touch them!

Scarcely a third of the way up the tower, we at last attained a circular room filled with various mechanisms. The Astronomer led us through one of the six doors encircling the chamber, onto a gray stone rampart surrounding the outside of the tower.

We stood as if in the depths of space and before us flamed the stars! The nearest, hanging only a few yards away, could be reached by a

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stone bridge passing from the Sixth to the Seventh Tower, a span five feet wide, without balustrades. The slow rotation of the stars made it seem to sway.

"This way," the Astronomer said, leading down the span.

For a moment I faltered. Though I have never feared heights, the infinite abyss unnerved me. Forth, having undoubtedly accompanied his father countless times, gave me a mirthless grin. "What's the matter? Does the farmer fear the sky?"

He could have said nothing to provoke me more. I gritted my teeth in what I hoped was a confident smile — probably more a terrified rictus — and followed Forth over the bridge.

Strange thoughts flood a man in high places. The Void is terrifying, yet compelling. One has only to step off.... I glanced into the abyss only once, then despite my irritation at Forth, hurried to draw closer to him.

Even through my apprehension the stars compelled me. A few feet overhead hung a red beauty — pulsing with light, the heat dancing off its surface. Below the bridge hung another, nearly ice-blue, its rotation slow, its flames wisping away in tendrils.

The Astronomer stopped beside a pair of twin yellow stars hanging directly beside the span at chin level, each no more than a foot across. He gave a boyish grin, made radiant in the starlight.

"This is your subject," he said. "These revolve around one another, dancing like a young couple consumed with love! Their orbits will soon require correction. Your task is to observe and to summon me at the proper time."

I reached out my hand to grasp the roaring sun, but the Astronomer stopped me with a warning tap. "You must never touch them."

"Would I be burned?"

"I am uncertain, as we are not consumed though we stand so near. Probably you would, but even worse, you might affect their orbits."

"Sir," I asked. "Are we really standing among the stars? Why can we look upon them with unshielded eyes? How do we breathe in airless space? And why are we larger than the suns?"

He smiled again. "I will answer only the first question, for the rest proceed from it. We *do* stand among the stars, and yet we do not, for this — " he waved his hands to indicate all around us, "this is a metaphor, an

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allegory. But the mechanisms we use truly control the heavens. It is a paradox; life is full of such. And I repeat, you must not touch the stars."

"I understand," I said.

Thereafter we returned to the circular chamber, from where we would monitor the twins. With his usual precision, the Grand Astronomer showed us our task, ordered us to contact him when the gauges reached the appropriate levels, and departed.

Our vigil proved longer than I anticipated. We lived in the chamber for days, eating the food brought us and taking our turns at the monitors. At first, I grew anxious, expecting the gauges to unexpectedly leap to their places, but gradually I recognized the ponderous nature of the suns. *Star work is slow work*, as we say. Only being able to step onto the rampart and study the burning brilliance of the luminaries kept me from going mad with boredom.

For Forth, it was surely a nightmare. He sighed, he slept. He produced an illustrated book from inside his heavy robe entitled *The Great Gliders* and pored over it for hours.

I have often wondered if the Grand Astronomer simply assigned two lads to a task, or if in his wisdom he sensed Forth's resentment toward me and forced us together to see if we could be friends.

Whatever the case, being young, we had not yet developed an aptitude for hoarding a grudge. As the days passed, we came to know one another. For my part, I had less to overcome — Forth had seldom treated me with intentional cruelty. Eventually I asked him about the book. He shrugged as if it meant nothing, but a fire, like a touch of starlight, winked in his eyes when he looked upon it.

"It's only a book," he said.

"About what?"

He glanced down shyly. "About those who build air gliders, machines to ride the wind, in the land of High Gable."

"Is it dangerous?"

His eyes flashed madly then. "Sometimes. But I rode one once, two years ago, and there is nothing like it. They experiment with them all the time, and talk of adding motors to make them fly like paddle boats on a river. I want to be part of it, to become an aviator. That's what they call them. I want to move to High Gable and work there."

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"An aviator," I rolled the unfamiliar word over my tongue. "But you are to be the Grand Astronomer! You would have to leave the Star Watch."

"I hate the Star Watch!" His vehemence seemed to startle even himself. "My father talks only of stars, as if he were a shepherd and they the sheep, but I hear nothing he says! He knows them by names I can never remember. These twins we watch — I don't even know *their* names."

"Rigelius and Thollamai."

"You see! You are the one my father calls gifted. *You* should be the Grand Astronomer."

"I?" I replied, both embarrassed and pleased. "You've been here all your life."

"And hated it!"

We sat silent a time, I baffled that anyone could want other than to work in the Tower of Astronomy. But at last I said, "Does your father know?"

"How could I tell him? He has craved this all my life."

"My father wished me to be a farmer, but I cared nothing for it. I used to believe I could make myself carry on his work, but it was *his* work and not my own. When your father took me into his service, my father accepted it, though he was not pleased."

"My father would *never* accept it," Forth said, but a hint of hope crept into his voice.

That afternoon Forth poured out his love of gliders to me, as if the words, dammed so long behind his teeth, finally broke through, with my ears the reservoir to receive them. It stunned me that this quiet lad could speak with such passion about anything. Certainly he had never before told anyone of his dreams. He showed me his book and withdrew from between its pages scraps of tattered papers depicting his own glider designs. I, in turn, related my elation at finally following the path I loved.

"How strange it is," he said, greatly moved. "You are doing the thing I despise, yet it is your greatest ambition."

Later, we went out to look at the twins. Standing on the rampart, we gazed, I happily, Forth with a brooding eye.

"Does the Void frighten you?" he asked.

"A little."

"It doesn't frighten me. Nor my father. He is extremely ancient, you

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know, older than anyone because he spends so much of his life between the stars. He once told me time does not pass here, and if a man stays on the rampart he requires neither food nor sleep."

We sat in silence again, I pondering this new bit of wonder while the suns crackled all around. Eventually, Forth said, "I fell once, fifteen feet from one of the towers onto a stone ledge. That's how I broke my nose and leg." He slapped his thigh for emphasis. "A few feet over and I would have dropped into the Void."

"That must have been terrifying." I retreated a step from the balustrade at the thought.

His eyes held a strange light, "You would think so, but it wasn't. The moment seemed to last forever, as if I was flying. Ever since, I find myself imagining what it would be like to spread my cloak and go drifting into the darkness. What a ride that would be, sailing on solar winds!"

I shivered. "Not for me, thank you."

DAY AND NIGHT meant nothing to us, with the black abyss before us and scores of suns in the sky. We kept constant watch, taking turns during the hours normally considered night.

When Forth roused me for breakfast the next "day" he seemed excited. When I asked why he had failed to wake me for my shift, he replied, "I spent the night thinking. Besides I wanted you to rest, for you must keep the watch alone today. I am going to tell my father I want to be an aviator."

I stopped eating. "Are you sure?"

"I am." His face was set with a glorious certainty.

Because of my concern for Forth, the time crawled by, and I found myself pacing the chamber. He returned six hours later, his face pale, his expression ragged. I did not need to question him, nor did he explain except to say, with an effort not to weep, "Now I know my duty."

He was not the same thereafter, and the watch became once more a dull, companionless affair. But as the hour for the adjustment drew near, I became more and more fascinated by the twin stars. Perhaps I, who had prompted Forth's ill-fated confrontation with his father, grew obsessive to avoid blaming myself for my friend's silence.

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Whatever the case, I became absorbed, not just in the stars themselves, but in the adjustment mechanisms. During the time Forth had been communicative, I had asked him many questions about the instruments. Despite his denials of astronomical skill, his quick mind fathomed more than perhaps even his father realized.

But there remained certain matters concerning the controls which neither he nor I understood, and in those hours of Forth's new silence, their mystery became my fixation.

The answer came to me all in a flash, so I cried aloud.

"What is it?" Forth asked, perhaps thinking I had injured myself with the instruments.

"I understand!" I almost shouted. "The linear mechanism! It makes sense!"

He drew near despite his melancholy, his interest aroused.

"Explain," he said.

"These levers control what your father sometimes calls the Engines of Apogee, and these," I grasped a pair of rotating knobs, "affect linearity and rotation. It is the combination of the two that actually makes the adjustment! By moving the levers together when the gauges both read one-hundred sixty-five, the suns can be moved oh so slightly!"

"I don't understand," Forth admitted. "How are the two related?"

"It's exactly as your father says," I continued, nearly blind with joy. "It's the art of it! Don't you see?"

Sometimes in his enthusiasm a young man grows unintentionally cruel. The Grand Astronomer was correct in suggesting I had a gift for the stars, as many are gifted in matters beyond my own comprehension. Having made an intuitive leap, I failed to see why anyone else could not do the same.

As Forth stood staring at me his look became gradually more dire. Finally he said, "I understand nothing."

"You will!" I said. "You will, when we make the adjustment!"

His expression turned to astonishment. "We, make the adjustment? You've lost your mind! We are to call Father. *He* will make the adjustment."

"But don't you see, we don't have to!" I said. "We can do it ourselves. It's simple. Anyone could do it. We'll save your father the trouble of a trip. He'll be proud of us."

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"He'll be proud of you!" Forth spat.

"No, of both of us!" I was filled with inspiration. "Don't you see we have the opportunity to feel the power of the stars themselves? Oh, Forth, I know once you've tasted what it's like to be a true Astronomer you'll want it for yourself."

I said this and much more. I was persuasive, perhaps more so than ever in my life, either before or since, and my final argument lit a light in my friend's eyes, for he did want to please his father. It was manipulation of the worst sort, but I believed my own words at the time, and he fastened to them with all the talons of desperation.

Two hours later found us waiting at the controls, I manning the levers within the room, Forth on the rampart dealing with another apparatus consisting of a large, corkscrew valve. That an experienced Astronomer could have done the procedure single-handedly shows how little we truly knew.

The gauges inched toward the required measurements. In my vanity, I neither doubted my own ability to control the stars, nor considered the consequences of failure. I burned with concentration, my eyes darting between the twin suns and the intricate mechanism beneath my hands.

More than scientific precision guides the Astronomer. If he is gifted, he senses the moment when the change must be made, feels the shifting star fields, the fluctuations, the variations in heat and light. Perhaps he perceives them in his soul; I cannot say. But I felt the balance between the forces and elements with such fierce intensity I did not even need the gauges to recognize the moment.

I moved first one lever, then another. I closed an outlet; I raised a switch. I felt the power of the Grand Astronomer within my own fingertips. My face flushed with triumph.

"The valve!" I called to Forth. "Open it!"

"Now?" he shouted back. "Are you certain?"

I was on my feet at once. "Yes! Yes! It must be now!"

The Gift lay so strong upon me I thought Forth must surely sense its urgency.

I think the look in my eyes frightened him, for he yanked the valve with all his strength, then gaped at me in horror. "It's stuck! I can't open it!"

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Neither of us had thought to test the mechanisms beforehand. I scrambled across the chamber to help.

Before I could reach Forth's side, a rumbling arose, sending all the towers trembling, as if the twin stars outside the chamber scraped against one another. I stumbled and fell, but Forth held onto the valve. Despite the tremors, he scrambled up beside it onto the balustrade itself, and with his back to the abyss, pulled with all his might. The valve opened with a loud hiss, just as the tremors doubled in intensity. Thrown off balance, Forth tumbled from the rampart into the darkness.

At that moment, I must have finally realized that whole stars were at stake, for despite my horror at Forth's disappearance, I rushed to the valve and completed the turn. The tremors instantly ceased. I leaned over the parapet and looked down.

Forth clung to an iron bar, his heavy cloak billowing in the Void.

I dashed inside, retrieved a rope, tied one end to the valve, and tossed the other to Forth. He caught it, pulled himself up to where his feet found purchase on the bar, and rested there a moment, panting from his exertions.

"Oh, Forth, come up!" I cried, stretching my hands toward his. I was overwhelmed with exultation at seeing my friend alive and the tremors ended. "We did it, Forth! We did it! The stars moved at our command!"

Perhaps it was the triumph on my face, the joy in my eyes, the ferocious wonder, that turned his expression to stone.

"No, Edwin," he said softly. "You did it. The stars moved at *your* command."

"We both did. Take my hand!"

"My father was right. You *are* gifted." His eyes searched my face with a keen hunger, and for a moment we seemed frozen in time. Gradually, his expression changed to one of intense exhilaration, as if a tremendous revelation suffused his features.

"Standing here," he said, "I can feel the solar winds blowing beneath the rampart."

He was right, for his cloak swelled hugely, making him look like a great bird. I could hear the hot whispering sun tides. The shadow and light played across his brow, transfiguring him. He looked holy, immortal.

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"You were born to be the Grand Astronomer," he said passionately. "And I to fly. Oh, Edwin, I will follow my dream. I will *be* an aviator."

I stretched my hands even farther to reach him, but he smiled and released the rope.

He did not fall. He glided. He swooped, drifting farther and farther down between the stars. And as he descended he shouted with a joy that seemed to go on forever. I watched in horror until he vanished from sight.

THE GRAND ASTRONOMER did not live many years thereafter. He blamed himself, even as he forgave me. He was that kind of man. And before he died he appointed me his replacement.

It is harder to forgive oneself. Even though the young boy of those days, fresh from the farm, meant no malice, even though his only crime lay in loving the stars and his Gift too much, I wonder how he could have been so blind.

I seldom speak now, especially to the young, without considering my words, and I go often, even after all these years, to the Sixth Tower to stand before the stars. If, as we believe, time does not exist within the Void and neither food nor sleep is required, Forth has become immortal. It was the contemplation of that eternal fall that killed his father.

But at such times when my guilt ebbs, I do not share the Astronomer's grief, for I heard Forth's shouts of delight echoing between the stars. In those moments I see him gliding forever. Laughing. The supreme aviator lost in exultation.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

IMAGINATIVE MOVIEMAKING ON PENNIES A DAY

COMING OF age, I used to hate hearing older people bemoan the advent of television, gizmo toys, and game electronics. "When I was young," they'd say, "We didn't have any of these fancy doodads. We had to use our imagination when we played together."

"Yeah. Right," I'd (mentally) reply. "And you had to walk ten miles in the snow to get to school." Yadda, yadda, yadda. Blah, blah, blah. Their complaints sounded like reactionary nonsense to me.

And then, I briefly student-taught a children's improvisational workshop, and I began to see the point of my elders' laments. My job was to help the participants learn to develop their mental muscles and get in touch with their creative impulses through instantaneous, improvisational performance. It was a struggle for some. Some kids of ten or eleven had already handed over their imaginations to external forces. They were dependent on media and props to tell — or enjoy — a story.

Bit by bit, they rediscovered those skills. By the end of the workshop, almost all of the students exhibited a tremendous ability to convey ideas and emotions and plot with just their physical and mental "instrument." They could convey a situation so vividly that, watching them, I believed in it, too.

The alchemy of storytelling — the melding of the imagination of performers with their audience — is heady stuff. When it works.

I continue to look for that same rush from every written story I read, and from every movie I watch. And, most of the time, as my frequent kvetching in these pages indicates, I am sorely disappointed.

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So, now, let me sound (again?) like the old fogey reactionary. Modern filmmakers are just far too caught up in their electronic toys and their expensive CGI visuals to the detriment of visceral, believable storytelling. Imagination, emotion, coherent characters all seem to play second fiddle to "effects."

Too much money (and not enough intelligence) is thrown up on the screen. Peel back all the doodads, I say. Let Steven Spielberg remake *A.I.* on $3 million or less. If he did, it might be a better film. It might even pack the kind of wallop that *Sugarland Express* and *Jaws* did!

Fat chance, on that score.

So I just have to comfort myself with the pleasures of watching the work of lesser-known directors, doing imaginative work on extremely limited budgets. With that in mind, it was indeed a pleasure, at the end of a summer full of empty movies bloated with dazzle, to see two films by Brad Anderson back to back.

Released within a couple of weeks of one another, both films are unusual genre films, with practically no special effects. Both nonetheless deliver a good deal of entertainment value for those who can still appreciate a character-driven movie with a distinctive vibe, but practically no bells and whistles.

First up was *Session 9*, an old-fashioned horror film. No beginning-to-end slasher gore. No foul-mouthed adolescents spoofing, goofing, and dying. *Session 9* is a highly atmospheric suspense yarn with a strong sense of place. In fact, Anderson has admitted that he had the setting for his film before he had a screenplay.

For almost a decade, the filmmaker lived in the Boston area, making documentaries and filming his two debut features, the seldom seen *The Darien Gap* (1995), and the only slightly less obscure romantic comedy, *Next Stop Wonderland* (1998). At one point, driving north of Boston, he spotted the old Danvers State Hospital, a massive Victorian five-hundred acre state-run insane asylum. Although the hospital was shut down in 1985, its decaying splendor is only matched by the more than one hundred years of anguish that seem to permeate its walls and grounds. An illegal foray into the estate with a group of "urban spelunkers" convinced Anderson and his friend and co-writer, the actor Stephen Gevedon, that this would be the perfect setting for a horror flick.

So, the two wrote a screenplay,

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got modest funding of under two million, put together a cast and crew, and headed to Danvers for a twenty-one-day guerrilla-style shoot, using a brand-new Sony 24P high-definition video camera (put in the capable hands of cinematographer Uta Briesewitz). The resulting film is stylish and visually evocative, even if it was shot quickly, on the cheap.

The Danvers Hospital is certainly a character in its own right. And in the great tradition of old haunted house flicks, it's a complex and tortured one at that. But the human characters are equally interesting. Gordon (Peter Mullen), a Scots immigrant, is the grizzled, stoical owner of a struggling hazmat abatement company. It's been a while since he and his foreman, Phil (David Caruso), have made the winning bid on a job. And Gordo has a wife and new baby to support.

Quietly desperate for a lucrative contract, Gordon promises to remove the asbestos from the old Danvers Hospital in one week, even though it's easily a three-week job. So the pressure is on as the two managers and their crew tackle their difficult and dangerous task. It doesn't help that the place is spooky as hell; full of reminders of the troubled souls who lived and died there; "patients" who met with "treatments" that included cold immersion baths, prefrontal lobotomies, and long stints in isolation cells.

The work crew seems a bit dysfunctional, too. Gordon is starting to show wear and tear from sleep deprivation. His new baby wails through the night. Phil has a simmering feud with a co-worker, Hank (Josh Lucas). Hank stole Phil's girlfriend, possibly just to get his goat, and seems less interested in romance than a foolproof "exit plan" from his unpleasant job. Mike King (co-writer Gevedon) is a law-school dropout from a well-to-do family, who takes frequent "breaks" to explore the hospital's abandoned rooms. And Jeff (Brendan Sexton III) appears to be nothing more than an agreeable, if somewhat aimless, teen, temporarily joining the crew to help out his uncle. Unfortunately, he's not the brightest penny in the piggybank, and is petrified of the dark, to boot.

I loved how well Anderson expresses the blue-collar milieu of his characters. Despite the fact that they are doing dangerous work, these men are completely matter-of-fact about it. They are (seemingly) less concerned with the risks of getting life-threatening fibers in

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their lungs than in deciding whose turn it is to go out and get their fast-food lunch of the day.

Still, the tension builds as the men's relations become more strained, and the deadline for completion looms. The general gloom and eerie artifacts of the hospital compound the pressure. Mike has discovered old tapes from the therapy sessions of an inmate with multiple personality disorder. And as the taped sessions play out, they seem to mirror the mounting apprehension at the work site.

I suspect that most people will have little patience for this kind horror flick today. There's little gore (until the very end), and nothing supernatural about the proceedings to speak of. The suspense here is even more naturalistic than that of *The Blair Witch Project*; a fact that may seem especially odd to anyone who realizes that the hospital stands on the same real estate as old Salem Village, the locale of the Salem Witch Trials.

But Anderson is trying to build dread, not Halloween hokum here. His aim is to show how the human mind can unravel with shocking consequences. Those hoping to see a physical manifestation of Mephistopheles stalk these crumbling halls should give this movie a pass. Anderson does leave us, finally, with the idea that there *might* be a universal evil entity that preys on human weakness. If you want to believe it, he gives you full permission.

But Brad Anderson's view is both more prosaic and more chilling: Every soul has a breaking point. And when that comes, the human consequences can be horrific.

Within a couple of weeks of the limited release of *Session 9*, another feature written and directed by Brad Anderson hit art houses. It was an equally unusual film, a romantic dramedy with science fiction flourishes. That film is called *Happy Accidents* and it stars Vincent D'Onofrio — one of my all-time favorite actors — and the seriously underrated Marisa Tomei.

The setting, at least, is more conventional this time. This is the New York of *Sex and the City*, only grittier and more believable (and with a much more modest wardrobe budget). Ms. Tomei plays Ruby, a classic enabler who's trying to change her relationship ways. She and her women friends have a shoebox full of photographs that they call the "Ex-Files." Ruby doesn't want to add another snapshot to the collection of losers. So, she is in therapy and trying to take a break from men.

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Then Ruby meets Sam (D'Onofrio), a hospice worker with an innocent smile and a loopy enthusiasm for life...and her. Like many New Yorkers, Ruby considers anyone from the middle hinterlands of America to be an unsophisticated hayseed. Therefore, when Sam says he's from Dubuque, she thinks that explains his enthusiasm for polka music and his complete lack of knowledge about red wines and liquor.

Foolhardy or not, she lets herself fall head over heels. And, within a week, she invites him to move in with her.

But soon, Sam's idiosyncrasies become increasingly bizarre. First of all, he seems to fall into a trance at the oddest times. Still, as long as he doesn't space out during sex, Ruby's girlfriend Gretchen (Nadia Dajani) tells her, there's nothing to worry about. Or maybe there is. Sam is also evasive about his background and murmurs strange phrases about things like "breaking the causal chain" in his sleep. To top it off, he's frightened to death of miniature dogs.

Is Sam a nut? It's beginning to look like it. When pressed, Sam decides to break down, violate protocol, and tell his lady-love the truth. He really is from Dubuque. Only it's the Atlantic coastal city of Dubuque, circa 2470.

All this happens fairly early in the film. And the rest of the movie consists of Sam's elaborate (and ever-shifting) descriptions of the future, his family, and how he came to seek out Ruby, juxtaposed with Ruby's roller coaster reactions to her lover's "kinky role-playing." Could he possibly be telling the truth? Or is he just a fruit loop of the first order, the ultimate in men she won't be able to fix?

The science fiction aspects of Sam's narrative are certainly entertaining. (This includes the most erotic explanation of time travel that you will likely ever see in a film.) But, like Ruby, the audience is kept guessing if Sam is one of the last great romantics, back from the future to win, and possibly save, his one true love, or if he is, instead, a deranged fellow in need of an updated Danvers Hospital.

Whether Sam is crazy or not, Mr. Anderson believes that romantic love is most certainly lunacy. Still, it's the madness of relationships, he seems to be saying, that gives them their spark. Just ask Ruby's mother (Tovah Feldsuh), whose passionate marriage mysteriously died once her husband gave up his drunken ways and she her co-dependence.

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In the long run, it doesn't matter whether Sam's elaborate stories about the future are true. It only matters whether Ruby believes him — believes *in* him. Sam would say it has something to do with Cheeseman's scientific theory of something or other. Fine. And I have my own theories, which lead me to believe that a film as quirky and charming as *Happy Accidents* is no accident.

Here's my theory: To make an exhilarating movie, a filmmaker should play with a genre, but not in the same old ways. S/he should strip away the flourishes and FX, and get back to the essentials of believable characters living through an involving story. This is something Brad Anderson can do with pennies to Steven Spielberg's dollars.

I don't mean to sell Mr. Spielberg short. I say we send Steven out there with a couple of mil — pocket change to him — and see what he can do. I think he might just make one hell of a movie.

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Paul Park is the author of several novels in various genres, including Sugar Rain, Celestis, *and* The Gospel of Corax. *Due out soon is a collection of thirteen stories (including this one), entitled* If Lions Could Speak. *"Tachycardia" is an elegant tale from the cusp where the fantasy genre meets the mainstream.*

Tachycardia

By Paul Park

I RETIRED FROM THE CORPS of Engineers when I was sixty-five. During the afternoons I'd play golf at Colonial or City Park. I'd have lunch with friends, or dinner and a couple of drinks. Then I'd go home to my house on General Pershing Street and turn on the lights. I kept that place as clean as a hotel. After Mary Elizabeth passed away, I took down most of the photographs, cleaned out most of the things.

It says in the Bible that death can come at any time, so you might as well not fret about it. I was on the seventeenth tee at City Park. I sat down on the grass, because I was dizzy and my pulse went to 250. That day I was paired with Bobby Squires, who's a doctor I've known for years. He drove me downtown to his office at University Hospital — the old Hotel Dieu on Tulane Avenue. I hadn't been there since Geoffrey was born. In half an hour I was on a table in the emergency room, and the technician was putting in a drip.

Bobby explained the whole thing as I lay there with a needle in my arm. There is an amino acid called Adenosin that stops the heart. After

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eight seconds they switch to saline and start it up again. Usually that takes care of the problem, which is called tachycardia. But my heart was still roaring even after the procedure, so they decided to try it a second time. I couldn't breathe because of the pressure in my chest, and I passed out.

How can I describe what I was feeling? Your heart stops, and everything is still.

My wife once read a book that says you hang suspended in the air above your body. I thought that was ridiculous, even at the time. I was sitting in the dirt, rubbing my knees and the backs of my hands, and then my chest and thighs.

It can be painful to grow old by yourself. If you outlive the members of your own family, you've lived too long. Now my heart was quiet, and I didn't breathe. I sat until my eyes were accustomed to the darkness. Smells came to me — mold, concrete, a trace of urine. The dirt under my hands was clotted with spider web, and it seemed to me that I could hear the whining of a mosquito.

Now I could see the limits of that place, a concrete box about ten feet square. The ceiling was low, and I didn't want to stand. Instead I crawled forward on my hands and knees. There was a gray light that got stronger as I crawled toward it, though it remained indistinct and didn't throw off any kind of shadow. It wasn't until I reached the opening that I understood why. The concrete passage to the outside air was narrow, and it turned back on itself in two ninety-degree angles. Squatting on my haunches, looking back toward where I had been sitting, I saw deep, horizontal slits in the wall above my head, blocked, I imagined, with vegetation or debris. I could see now where I was, a concrete pillbox or bunker, with walls many feet thick. And though I understood the principle of the entrance, I was not prepared, as I turned the corners, for the brightness of the outside air. As I crawled out into the open, the brightness was like a punch in the nose, and my eyes were watering.

As I had had to get used to the darkness, now I got used to the light, which took a longer time. I collapsed onto my knees and forearms and put my head down. I could see that I was wearing my golfing clothes, and my hat was on my head. My shorts and polo shirt had seemed appropriate to a fall day in New Orleans. Abruptly, now, I felt like a fool.

There were huge, shaggy trees all around me, with roots like the fins

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of a rocket. There wasn't much undergrowth, and the ground was dry. Through the tree trunks I could see the ocean. Except for the entrance, the pillbox behind me was obscured with moss and hanging vines, masses of purple flowers.

I've spent a good amount of time in the swamps of Southeastern Louisiana. We had a camp near Slidell. But this was not like that. The smells were different. And the bugs as they lighted on my skin — I didn't recognize them. They didn't cause me any trouble. My golfing shoes were full of ants that didn't bite.

I got up and staggered to the shore. Leaning on a tree, its bark as smooth as skin, I shaded my eyes and looked out toward the sun on the water, which was like a mirror. There was a mud cliff that was subsiding into a swamp, and then the open sea beyond. There was no wind.

As we get older, it gets easier to summon dreams and images from the past. After a moment, I thought I'd figured out where I was. My father's older brother had been a captain in the Marines. He'd had a stroke after he retired, and when I was a teenager I used to go visit him in a nursing home in St. Bernard Parish. It was a depressing place, but he'd taken a shine to me, and I'd sit by his bed and listen to him complain about "that faggot, Douglas MacArthur," as he called him. He'd tell me stories about New Guinea. I knew about the Japanese defenses, the mangrove swamp where my uncle's unit had been pinned down. "It was a day in hell," he said.

All that was long ago. The place was empty now. After a few minutes I turned away from the shore and followed a path through the bushes.

When my son Geoffrey was a little boy, on weekends I used to take him down to Audubon Park. Right by the zoo there is a stand of oak trees, and we used to play a game. He would toddle off into the undergrowth, and I would count for a minute and come after him. Usually I'd find him hiding about twenty feet away in some obvious place, or else standing in plain sight. But one day he disappeared, and after a few minutes of searching I was yelling as hard as I could. I assumed he really was hiding from me, even after I told him the game was over. But what had happened was this: He had fallen into a hole where someone had buried some illegal trash. He was up to his waist in the debris. And though I had passed within a few feet of him, he had been too frightened to cry out.

What is it that brings certain memories suddenly to mind? My son — his

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eyes were a color I've never seen before, a gray so clear that it was disconcerting. Maybe the image of his face is never far away from me. That day my threats had not consoled him. Terrified, I yanked him out, and his leg caught on a piece of metal. He had to get a tetanus shot.

Why do certain images come to us, whole and complete, as if out of the air? Is there always a reason? Maybe this was my train of thought: There were some sounds from jungle animals I couldn't see. Maybe there were some monkeys crying on the other side of the fence, which separates the park from the zoo. Now, as I took the path away from the shore, I thought about the animals my uncle had told me about, the ones he had seen in the camp near Buna in New Guinea, or else heard crying in the darkness. Why are they so frightening, the dangers we cannot see? In my son's face, even up to the last days, I could not guess what he would do.

Though I could hear the noises, I myself could make no sound. When I stumbled at the bottom of a small ravine, I opened my mouth and no sound came. My hat was gone, and I lay on my back at the bottom of the ditch.

And when my eyes had cleared, I saw that I was looking up at a human face, a black man. I have always been a prejudiced person, but I was happy to see these fellows — there were several of them. The sunlight was behind their heads. It slanted through the tall trees. Then I felt them help me to my feet, and they were pushing me through the long leaves, and I could feel the pain in my chest. Then they laid me down and left me, and I turned onto my side, and I could see Geoffrey, my son.

He was about twenty feet away. He was standing inside a bamboo cage, dug into the slope so that only the top third of it rose above the surface of the ground. I lay in a kind of a dell that had been cut into the raw earth. I lay on wood chips, and near me was a campfire.

I rose to my knees and tried to speak, but no sound came out. "Geoffrey," I tried to say. He wasn't looking at me. He was staring through the bars of his cage, his arms as thin as the sticks of bamboo, as they had been toward the end. Surely he'd been mistreated. The fire was smoking. On a stump near the fire lay an army helmet covered with netting and leaves.

Who had done this to him? What enemy had attacked us? I tried to speak but could not. Geoffrey stared listlessly away.

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There was a pain in my chest. Still I managed to crawl forward and reach out my hand. "Geoff," I tried to say. But then there were some explosions that shook the ground, and I dropped down into the dirt. When I opened my eyes again, I was lying on my back on the table in the emergency room, the needle in my arm. My heart was beating at a normal rate.

"Jesus," said Bobby Squires, "I thought we'd lost you. You were gone for over two minutes. They had to use the paddles."

"I need more time," I said, which he misunderstood.

This was after they had brought me upstairs to his office to recuperate. I was in a wheelchair, though I felt fine. Bobby was going over my prognosis, and telling me to quit drinking and the little cigars I smoke. I'd heard it all before. I take medication for high blood pressure and high cholesterol, and he was telling me about that. He wanted to keep me overnight in the hospital for observation and tests, but I said no. I wanted to get home.

Later I sat on the back porch of the house on General Pershing Street, drinking an Old-Fashioned. My wife used to make them for me, but she'd left the recipe, and to tell the truth, they tasted better now.

This was the house we'd moved to when Geoffrey was about six. He'd gone to school around the corner. Looking out over the back yard, I could picture him playing in the dirt between the chain-link fence and the gardenias.

Everything had been fine for a long time. I was working hard to put food on the table. I'd have to go up to Baton Rouge.

So then he went away to Grinnell College, which is not what I'd wanted for him. He had excelled in high school, and I guess he expected to excel there too. This was in the late sixties. He had what you might call a nervous breakdown, although I never called it that. But it was enough for his deferment, and after that he came home to live. I admit I was unsympathetic. He was my only child. I wanted what was best. Looking back, knowing myself, it's hard to imagine what I'd do differently. Nowadays, of course, you can cure any of those mental problems with a few pills.

A few days after this experience with my heart, I went out to the camp north of Slidell in the Honey Island Swamp. I hadn't been there for almost thirty years, since Geoffrey's death. It had been an important place to him and me. Now, after my experience in the hospital, for the first time I

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understood why the pictures in my mind had been so vivid as my uncle told his stories about New Guinea. There was a stretch of shore near the cabin — I could see it now. For a long time it had been hidden from me by some trick of the mind. Instead of cypress, I had put in mangrove trees. I had made a steeper slope above the beach. And of course I had put in a whole ocean, the Solomon Sea, I guess, instead of the wide, brackish waters of the river.

But the shape of the land was the same. Only the scale had changed. Perhaps when my uncle described the place to me, he had allowed the image of that shore to supplement his memory — he also knew the place well. Whatever the reason, as I came in over the old road, I thought about what I would find. I parked the Caddy at the turnaround, then got out and leaned against the hood for a while. It was evening time, after a clear, dry day. There were some lights at the neighbors' house, where Mrs. Douglas lived year-round.

Some cousins of mine still used the camp on weekends. I walked down the dirt path and then onto the bridge. The cabin was built on stilts over the water, a one-room, tin-roofed shack with a deck on three sides. There'd been some new work on the place, and it had been painted green, though not recently. There was a padlock on the door. I couldn't see anything through the windows, just some boxy shadows, though the table was the same. No one knew I was coming. Most of that part of the family, I hadn't spoken to in years.

The water was low. I lit a Dutch Masters to keep the bugs away, and sat out on the deck, dangling my feet, looking back toward shore. There was a new boathouse in the trees. After a while, I unwrapped a pint of bourbon, which I had mixed in the bottle with some of that Old-Fashioned syrup. I wasn't taking any of my medications, but even so, the doctors had warned me how it could be years before I had another episode of tachycardia. I could die first, which didn't interest me.

The water lay black and flat to Honey Island. It sucked at the pilings. I finished the cigar, then walked across the bridge, around past the new boathouse, down the slope onto the strand. It was an odd feeling — a place I knew well, except I hadn't been there in over twenty-five years. Weeks together in my childhood, long weekends with Geoffrey or alone, then nothing.

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The shape of the shore was just as I remembered it. The creak of the dry mud underfoot. I walked toward the fallen cypress where they had found the body. It had washed among the cypress knees, under some bushes that overhung the water. No current to speak of — a dry, November night like this one. He had been drinking, they said. Mary Elizabeth was with me, and when we were driving back to the city from Slidell, suddenly we hit a squall over the lake. The streetlights and the raindrops on the windshield made a pattern on my wife's face.

I have had good luck in several aspects of my life. The worst things are not failures, but what can't be helped. My wife was religious at one time, which was no consolation, even though her priest was a reasonable man. The teachings of the church are clear. It is a sign of God's love to be able to help others. We would have done anything.

Geoffrey had gone up to the cabin for the weekend to think things over, after I blew up at him and told him he couldn't live with us anymore. He had to get out on his own. The police said his death was accidental, which I didn't believe and neither did Mary Elizabeth — that's what ate her up. Now I stood on the same shore where he had stood. Next time, I thought, I would not be unprepared or empty-handed. I would do my duty as a father and a husband.

But of course I had a long time to wait. It wasn't until June that I experienced my second episode of tachycardia. I had been drinking some, and my blood pressure was high. "You look terrible," said Bobby Squires. It was the first time I had seen him in months.

"Just a little more time," I said.

When he finally understood what I was asking, he shook his head. "Are you crazy? We're not going through that again."

He didn't have a choice. I passed out in his office, and when I woke up I was lying in the darkness on a concrete floor. There was a smell of varnish in the air, and I knew where I was.

There was a pirogue on sawhorses, a line of brilliant light under the door. As before, everything was still. I lay on my stomach for a moment. But I had no time to waste. I was afraid the boathouse was padlocked on the outside. Then I put my hand against the door and it swung open.

The light was so sudden, it brought tears to my eyes. The grade was

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steep, and I pitched downhill onto the strand. The sun was bright on the water. It was the middle of the day.

I was afraid to raise my eyes and look. I studied the tassels of my loafers until I couldn't bear it any longer, and then I looked up. He was there, half-submerged under a cage of branches among the cypress knees. At first I thought he was just floating on the current, but then I saw him move his hand. I saw his head come up, his bony neck and long wet hair.

"Geoff," I said, and I could hear my voice. I felt in my pocket for my wife's pruning shears, which I had brought with me, along with several other tools. As I got close, I could see Geoffrey was caught. Something had him by the leg. I waded into the water and saw that his pant leg was caught on a submerged log, and he was yanking at it occasionally, trying to free himself. There was no urgency to any of his movements. Most of his torso was above water. He was lying in among the roots of a submerged tree.

He had on one of those colored shirts I used to hate. It's funny how you forget. Was this really how it had happened? He had just flopped around like a fish until he died? It was pitiful. The tide never ran more than a few inches here. Sure he was drunk, but that was no excuse. I saw his bony face with his cheek next to the water, his lank brown hair. He had been a strong boy, an athlete at Jesuit, but as he lost weight those last two years, his mother's weakness had come out in his face, her fine bones. His skin was paler than mine, dusted with red freckles. He'd gotten too much sun. It was a hot day.

He was pretty well caught. There was a hole in his jeans, and the cloth had twisted itself around a jutting stub of branch. The water was dirty and full of weeds. I worked at the wet denim with the garden shears until it gave way. All the time, Geoffrey was looking at me stupidly.

Like his mother, he was myopic, and his glasses had come off. It took him a while to figure out who I was. Then he was angry, and he tried to pull away. "Shut up," I said, as I was dragging him out of the water. "Enough of this crap. I'm taking you home."

He hadn't shaved. He smelled of whiskey and the swamp. I pulled him up by the collar of his shirt. He was twenty-three years old, and like a child. "Your mother will be worried stiff," I said.

"Leave me alone."

I wasn't having any of that. I pulled him toward the cabin. "Let me go.

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I can take care of myself," he said, which was ridiculous. I didn't have to answer. I didn't have to be his friend. But I wanted to get him away from that place where he had died. I kept in my mind the beach from my uncle's story, the camp deserted only for a moment. The camouflaged helmet on the stump.

Geoff was filthy and he stank. "Come on," I said. "Let's get cleaned up. You must be thirsty," I said — he was very frail. I put my hand around his upper arm and led him up the slope. There was an empty bottle in the mud.

"Where are my glasses?" he said, and I picked them up. But I wouldn't let go of his arm until I had brought him up the slope past where the boat house had been, and over the bridge to the cabin. It was the same weathered gray that I remembered, and the deck was broken in along one side. The screen door was ripped, and behind it the door stood open. There was Geoffrey's old rucksack on the bed, and clothes strewn around, and dirty dishes in the sink. "Let's clean you up and get you into some dry things," I said.

All that had happened between us, I know it was my fault. Mary Elizabeth used to tell me I had worked too hard when he was young. She didn't say so at the time. This much is true — the problems we had, I didn't see them coming. Now I poured out some water from one of the ten-gallon jerry cans into a pot in the metal sink. He wiped his face with a dishcloth while I looked at the calendar for 1973. It was from a car dealership off Chef Menteur. Beside the stove pipe, thumb-tacked to the wall, was a grocery list in my handwriting.

Geoffrey was quiet, and I turned my back to let him peel off his shirt. "You are a son of a bitch," he said, finally.

I glanced at him, then looked into his gray eyes. Clean-shaven, with a haircut and some meat on his bones, he would have been a fine boy. Although my heart was quiet, still I had an ache in my chest. The truth was, the whole time he was a kid we'd gotten along fine. There hadn't been a lot of talking, which was just as well. You can never figure things out just by talking. We'd gone to Pelican games on Saturday afternoons and never said a word. Later I'd taught him how to catch a fish, how to drive a car.

I hoped some day he'd remember some of those things. It didn't matter now, and there was no reason for me to get angry. In the back of my mind

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I knew we were in danger. There was no time for him to speak before I smelled the fire.

Someone had lit the deck on fire, torched the bridge. I tried to go out, but the heat was intense. It was unnatural the way the whole thing went up. The deck surrounded the house on three sides, and I stepped between the bed and the table to the window at the back, which looked straight down over the water. I broke the screen out of the frame and called out to Geoffrey, who was rummaging through the rucksack on the bed. The fire was bursting through the planks over the sink. The calendar curled up, dropped off the wall. And Geoffrey wasn't moving. He had his rucksack in his hand, and he was looking toward the open door, which was full of the roaring flame. I grabbed his wrist. The heat was intolerable, and I couldn't be gentle. I climbed over the sill and bundled him down into the water, which was about five feet below the sill and about five feet deep.

He wasn't resisting me. He followed me down and then I pulled him into deeper water, because I was afraid some of the beams of the house would fall. Then we paddled a little way downstream where we could touch the bottom as it rose onto a shoal of mud, thirty feet from the bank. The heat was on our faces as we squatted down to watch the burning house, and also the woods behind it catching fire, and the fire moving up and down the shore along the dry ground. There was fire on the other side of the river, too, and the sky darkened. Clouds came in, and a stiff wind, and it was dark except for the fire along the bank. There was all manner of scrub trees, but the treetops were dark and the tree trunks silhouetted by the flames, because the fire seemed to burn only low along the ground. So it got dark. The beams of the cabin collapsed into the water in a gust of sparks. The water was cold. I put my arm around Geoffrey's shoulder, and was surprised to find him heavier and more solid. He held onto my arm, and I could feel him being pulled away, as if there were something in the water that was holding onto him. I didn't have the garden shears anymore, but I had my sheath knife attached to my belt, and I pulled it out and hacked at the water while Geoffrey clung to my neck. All this time the wind was coming up, and there were waves on the river. The clouds were ripped to pieces overhead. I took hold of Geoffrey around the waist and brought him over the shoals onto the bank. The mud sucked at my shoes. The rain came toward us over the water, and it covered the fire and put it

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out, and we had to take shelter in the trees. Around us was the crash of breaking branches. I put my forearm over my eyes and then took Geoffrey by the hand. He followed like a boy, and I led him up the slope and through the smoking woods to my old Caddy — not the hunk of junk I own now. This one was solid as a tank, which was a good thing. I pushed a fallen branch off the roof, opened the door, and Geoff slid across the seat, and we were safe. The keys were in the ignition. The Caddy started up.

Then we were driving through the dark, and after a while the rain stopped and the wind quieted down. Geoff snuggled up against my side, and then he lay with his head on my knee. He didn't say anything, and after an hour or so we came into the lights of the city. He was lying on his back with his head on my knee, looking up through the windshield and the light was on his face. I drove right downtown. I parked the car on Tulane in a no standing zone, then carried Geoff into the Hotel Dieu, and then upstairs. I had him against my shoulder, and I was supporting his head. I knew the way. There were double doors to the maternity ward, and I went into the big room, and there was Mary Elizabeth looking as pretty as I'd ever seen her, though she was tired, and her head was against the pillows. But her face was glowing. I put Geoff into her arms, and he curled up contentedly. He hadn't cried the whole way. He was a good boy.

But I was a mess, and I didn't belong in that place. Mary Elizabeth scarcely glanced at me. Geoff had curled up under the covers, and there were some nurses giving me rotten looks — black women — as I say, I've never had much use for those people, though I've known a few. I didn't see a reason to stay, so I went upstairs to Bobby Squires's office. I didn't have to wait long to see him, just a few minutes, which was just as well. I had a pain like an elephant on my chest. "Christ Jesus," said Bobby — he was pretty shaken up. But after a few minutes I felt fine again.

Afterward I walked down to the Quarter, which was the first time I had been there in years. But it was a beautiful evening. I walked down Canal Street and across Royal, and found a little outdoor place near Jackson Square, where I could drink a cup of coffee and smoke a cigar. There were some bands playing for the tourists in back of the cathedral. I sat there for forty-five minutes or so, listening to the music and watching the people walk by. There was an Oriental girl with hair clear down to her behind. And I just sat there and sat there, and in my whole life I never felt so good. ☙

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Larry Connolly's first appearance in our pages was a short tale of telemarketing entitled "Prime Time!" (July 2001). He lives with his family in the Pittsburgh environs, an area that he loves, as you might well infer from this horror story.

Great Heart Rising

By Lawrence C. Connolly

THE CHEVY CLEARED THE corner, its squeal shattering the park's early-morning calm. Eli gripped the leash and pulled Coyote to the sidewalk. "Easy, boy!" He had come to the park to find peace in the long shadows of tall trees, but the speeding car was a reminder that the city was still there, eager to intrude.

The driver, a middle-aged African-American in a rumpled sports coat, glanced toward Eli and hit the brakes. The car swerved, jumped the curb, and plowed a strip of brittle turf before rocking to a stop.

Coyote barked, tugging the leash as the Chevy's doors clicked and swung wide.

The driver climbed out, slid a hand into his jacket, and said, "Your name Hayet?"

A kid climbed from the passenger side, his short hair lying like an airbrushed shadow against his dark scalp. Eli figured he was nineteen — twenty max.

The driver was older, the paunchy side of fifty. Flecks of gray silvered

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his temples. He produced a wallet, keeping his eyes on Eli as he rounded the car. "Are you Eli Hayet?"

"Who are you?"

He opened the wallet, flashing a badge. "Jones." He said it as if it were all the name anyone needed. Then, more forcefully, "Are you Eli Hayet?"

The kid held back, leaning against a rumbling fender, hands clenched in the pockets of his multicolored windbreaker.

"What's going on?" Eli asked.

A city cruiser rounded the bend, slowed, and pulled to a stop in front of the Chevy.

Jones folded his wallet. "Don't make me ask you again."

Eli glanced at the cruiser as its passenger door swung wide. "All right," Eli said.

Coyote barked louder.

"I'm Eli Hayet. What is this?"

A city officer stepped from the cruiser.

Jones pocketed his wallet. "We need your help, Mr. Hayet."

The city officer advanced, dropped to a squat, and extended a hand toward Coyote. "Hey, boy." Coyote sniffed the policeman's hand. "Good boy!" Then, to Eli: "I'll take your dog, sir."

"Take him?"

"Home. To your wife."

"We called her," Jones said. "She told us where to find you."

The officer took the leash.

Jones turned to the kid. "Maurice!"

Maurice straightened up.

"Get in the car. You're driving."

Maurice turned and darted around the rumbling grill.

Jones turned to Eli. "Please, Mr. Hayet. There isn't much time." He walked to the Chevy's rear door, opened it, and stepped aside. "I'll explain on the way."

Maurice glanced in the rearview as the Chevy thundered out of the park. "Eli Hayet!" His reflected eyes narrowed. "Didn't I see you on TV?"

"Did you?"

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"Yeah! It was you," Maurice said. "You and that environment lady." His eyes darted back to the road. "She don't like you much, huh?"

"She has issues."

"What'd she call you? A heartless bastard?"

Eli winced.

The environment lady: Sara River, half Iroquois and full-time spokesperson for the Open Space Coalition. She had looked into Eli's past and decided that his lineage gave him responsibilities.

"Heartless bastard," Maurice said again. "Why'd she call you that?"

Eli turned to Jones. "Is this about the Trees Glenn Development?"

"No," Jones said. "This got nothing to do with suburban sprawl." He lifted a fabric tote from the floor. Velcro rasped as he opened the flap.

"Is it about the Open Space Coalition?"

"No." Jones pulled a PowerBook from the fabric tote. "It's about multiple murder and hostage taking." He opened the PowerBook and turned the screen toward Eli, revealing the image of a single-level home on a parched, straw-covered lot. Yellow tape surrounded the property. In the background, skeletal homes formed an under-construction skyline.

"This house." Jones tapped the screen. "It's in the far-north suburbs, in a new community called Pleasant Springs. 134 Morningside Drive. Been there?"

"No."

"The family's named Driscol."

"I don't know them." Eli looked toward the front seat. Maurice's eyes kept darting to the mirror, watching.

"About forty minutes ago," Jones said, "Creek Township got a call from seventeen-year-old Brenda Driscol. She said that Woneesa had done something to her parents."

"Woneesa?"

"That's all she said."

"Woneesa did *something* to her parents?"

"Near as we can figure, *something* means *killed*."

Eli looked at the house on the screen. He felt as if he had missed something. "Who's Woneesa?"

Jones said, "We were hoping you'd tell us."

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"Why me?"

"Because," Jones said, "Woneesa is asking for you."

THEY DROVE NORTH on 279, toward the sprawling fiberboard communities that had leveled the hills and supplanted the forests north of the city. They passed Wessex Glen, the plan where Eli had lived for a year during his nomadic teens, and proceeded along the border of Westgate, a newer division that Eli remembered seeing long ago, when it had been a mass of stripped earth and skeletal homes.

Lawns, driveways, and cookie-cutter Tudors raced beyond the side windows as Jones continued his story. "Four minutes after Brenda Driscol's call, two Creek officers arrived at the house. They'd been there before. Seems Brenda has a minor drug record. They entered the front door at 8:14."

Eli studied the picture of the house. The windows stood closed against the summer's heat. The front door leaned inward, revealing a hall that stretched past a kitchen arch and toward a dim living room. Among the shadows lay something that might have been the body of a man.

"At 8:16, Creek Township got a second call from Brenda Driscol. Woneesa had stopped the officers and was prepared to do the same to anyone else who entered the house without permission."

"*Stopped* the officers?"

"That's what she said."

"But what does it mean?"

"It means they went in and didn't come out. One of them is lying in the hall. The other's face down in the kitchen. Basically it means the Township is in over its head, so they've called us."

"Who's 'us'?"

"Special Operations."

Maurice accelerated out of the end of the Westgate plan and veered left toward a bulldozed forest.

Jones turned toward his side window. "Look at this place." He scowled at the blur of splintered stumps and tread-gouged clay. "Everyone wants to live in the country, but the country keeps getting evicted."

They passed a real estate office built in the split-level style that had

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become popular in the sixties, after choice lots became scarce and developers began exploiting sloping terrain. Fresh sod covered the yard. Beside the declining walk, a fiberboard sign read:

YOUR NEXT MOVE
PLEASANT SPRINGS
A BILLINGHAM HOMES DEVELOPMENT

Billingham Homes was the same company that would soon break ground on Trees Glenn — the community for which Eli's firm had negotiated the purchase of over 1,500 acres of privately held forest along the Northwest Expressway.

Like Pleasant Springs, Trees Glenn would be composed entirely of single-family lots. No community parks. No significant reserves of free-standing trees or flowing water. But unlike Pleasant Springs, which had been built on landfill, Trees Glenn would displace a dense second-growth forest. It was that point that had led Sara River to brand Eli a heartless bastard.

"We're talking *coexistence*," she told Eli, pumping the word with a 4/4 rhythm: "*Co-ex-zis-tense*!" She followed him as he walked from the courthouse to his firm's Second Avenue garage.

He pushed on, conscious of the pivoting microphones and Betacams. One thing about Sara River, she knew how to stage an event.

"We're talking open-space planning, Mr. Hayet!" She cut in front of him, walking backward, giving the Betacams her strong cheeks and flashing eyes. Her clay-colored hands held an oblong of corrugated board. Scored and folded like a large book, the oblong opened with a snap as she spread her arms. "I want people to *know* you've seen *this*!"

A painting clung to the placard: a landscape of multifamily homes positioned between thick swatches of forest. He had seen it before, but Ms. River was not so much showing it to him as she was showing it to the five-o'clock news. "We're talking communing *with* nature, not *against* it!"

He set his jaw and kept walking, knowing that if he tried explaining the other kind of nature — human nature and the fact that homeowners valued property over forests — Ms. River would be ready with a sound-bite rebuttal.

"We're talking working *with* the environment, Mr. Hayet. You of all

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people ought to understand!" She stepped aside, letting him pass as she shouted, "Don't act like you don't know what I'm saying, *Hayethwas*!" And then, for the waving microphones: "*Heartless bastard*!"

Two cruisers blocked the entrance to Morningside Drive. Behind them, empty asphalt stretched toward a courtyard of newly finished lots. In front of them, a crowd gathered. Some of the people wore the bewildered look of evacuees. These were evidently the Morningside residents. One of them, a jogging-suited woman with tied-back hair and flip-flopped feet, turned toward the Chevy as it nosed into the crowd. She held an infant over a towel-draped shoulder, patting its butt as she made suspicious eye contact with Eli. He read her gaze and looked away. He knew about the territorial instincts of tract-home dwellers. Nowhere is an outsider less welcome than in the mazy heart of a housing plan. Certainly, if Woneesa had moved into the Driscol home, the neighbors would have seen him.

Maurice reached beneath the seat and placed a flashing light on the dashboard. He hit the siren, giving a quick WHOOP-WHOOP! as he eased forward. The crowd parted, and it was then that Eli saw the Eyewitness-News van.

Jones frowned. "Turning into a goddamn circus."

A reporter stood near the curb, positioned between the barricade and a shoulder-mounted Betacam. Behind her, neighborhood kids bounced in place, getting in frame for the morning news.

The barricade opened. Looking back, Eli saw the Betacam panning toward him. "I've made the news again." He glanced at Jones. "Next they'll offer me a series."

Jones ignored the joke.

Maurice smirked and gunned the engine.

They roared past the bare Tyvek faces of under-construction buildings and into the circular cul-de-sac rimmed with a dozen finished homes. The asphalt courtyard was a riot of vehicles: two cruisers, a Tri-Valley ambulance, an unmarked SWAT van, and the fiberglass-patched body of the Special Ops command center.

Along the road, construction equipment lay abandoned in the rising sun. In the courtyard, marksmen stood ready.

Jones tapped the side window, pointing toward the brick and vinyl

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face of the Driscol's single-story home. "That's it," he said. "The place you can't get near without Woneesa's permission." The double-pane windows blazed with reflected sun. "Our negotiator asked Brenda Driscol what it takes to get permission, and she told him *nothing*. It takes *nothing*. No one can *get* it, and only one person *has* it."

"Me?"

"That's what she says."

Maurice squeezed into a space behind the command van.

Eli said, "But I don't know Brenda Driscol."

"No. And she doesn't know you." Jones reached for the door handle. "But Woneesa does." He popped the latch and stepped out into the command van's oblong shadow.

BUILT ON a Ford 350-E chassis, the command center's interior was a riot of cables, reconditioned computers, and second-hand communication equipment. The cabinets and counters bore the not-quite-plumb look of low-bid labor. The air-conditioned breeze reeked of dirty coils.

A line of tinted windows overlooked the courtyard. Facing the windows, a young man with piercing eyes spoke into the duct-taped mouthpiece of a reconditioned headset. He spoke slowly, as if reasoning with a child. Beside him, a woman with blue-black hair turned as Jones, Maurice, and Eli stepped through the doors. Her almond eyes glanced at Eli and then at Jones. "Looks like you found our man."

Jones nodded. "Eli, this is Shef."

She extended a dark hand. "That's Shef with an *S* — as in Shefali."

Maurice snorted. "Now we got like a *Indian*-American *and* a American-*Indian*."

Eli let the comment pass. He was only one-quarter Iroquois on his father's side, which in his eyes hardly qualified as Native. Nevertheless, his face gave him away. He was the image, if not the spirit, of his paternal grandfather — Yethwas, the seed spreader.

Jones turned to the man with the duct-taped headset. "You talking to her, Walter? You got the kid on line?"

Walter touched a switch. An adolescent voice shrilled through a console speaker: "Woneesa's man has to come inside!"

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"Woneesa's man," Walter said, cupping the mouthpiece as he turned to Eli. "That's *you*."

Eli frowned. "Woneesa's man?"

Walter nodded, took his hand from the mouthpiece, and said, "That's good, Brenda. If Woneesa knows that Eli Hayet is here, Woneesa will let you go. That was the deal."

Silence.

"Brenda?"

Jones asked. "What's she doing?"

Walter shrugged. "Not sure. Sometimes she hangs up. Sometimes she just stops talking."

Jones stared at the house. "Where exactly is she?"

"Basement. Claims she's been down there all week."

"Tell me about the parents."

"Father, Tom Driscol, manufacturers rep—made his own hours, worked out of the home. Mother, Anne Driscol, teacher — off for the summer."

"So both parents were home when Woneesa arrived?"

Walter nodded. "That's when he killed them...six days ago...nearly a week before the kid called the Township."

Jones frowned. "Doesn't make sense. Even a self-employed rep and a vacationing teacher can't vanish for six days without being missed."

"Sure they can," Walter said. "People do it all the time." He dialed the parents' phone and patched it through the speaker. Two rings, a click, and then a message — Brenda's voice, cheerful with an attitude: "*Wassup*? Dad's taking us to the beach — *finally*!" She stretched the last word into a nasal whine. "Back in six days. Want to talk? Tell the machine!"

Walter broke the connection, sat back, and looked at Jones. "With the machine running interference, Brenda had plenty of time to bond with Woneesa."

"Excuse me?"

"That's what she called it — bonding with Woneesa."

"Sounds romantic."

"Gets better. She says Woneesa appeared in a dream. Told her to set up an apartment in the laundry room. She did, and they moved in together."

"And the parents?"

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"The mother's in the kitchen." Walter clicked his mouse, opening a grainy enlargement of the kitchen window. The picture had been taken at a high angle, perhaps from the roof of the command van. It showed what appeared to be an outstretched arm lying on a patch of gray floor. The hand lay palm down, fingers gently curved around a dishtowel. The contours of the hand and towel seemed strangely muted, as if coated in gray dust. The rest of the body lay out of frame, blocked by a slanting windowsill. "We don't know about the father. He doesn't show in any of the window shots, but we assume he's in there."

Jones glanced at the evacuated homes. "Six days ago was Saturday. Did the neighbors see anyone enter the house?"

"No. But it's a new development. No one knows anyone."

"Doesn't matter," Eli said, remembering the glare he'd taken from the woman at the entrance to Morningside Drive. "If a stranger came down this street, he'd have been noticed."

"Maybe," Jones said, staring at the Driscol home. "But what if he wasn't a stranger?" To Shef, he said, "What have you learned about Woneesa?"

"Not much." Shefali shrugged beneath her blue-black hair. "It'd help if we knew how to spell the name."

"The kid won't help?"

"No. And her pronunciation's all over the place." She keyed the name into her computer. "This is our best guess." She turned the screen, giving Jones and Eli a clearer view: WONEESA. "Name, word, and language searches have turned up nothing."

Brenda came back on line, ranting: "Where's Hayet?" Her voice crackled in the speaker. "Woneesa wants to see him. *NOW*!"

Walter lowered the volume. "Listen, Brenda — "

The speaker clicked and went dead.

Eli faced the van's tinted windows and stared past the Driscol home, toward a line of far-off hills. His mind raced over the route he had taken with Jones and Maurice: Wessex Glen, Westgate, and the bulldozed forest. Though the terrain had changed over the years, he realized that he had covered that ground before. He had been here, long ago, when the paved lot had been a shale-rimmed precipice. "Those hills." Eli pointed to the distant line of rounded peaks. "Blaston's over there. Am I right?"

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"Four miles north," Shef said. "You know you got serious expansion when one city's sprawl becomes another town's suburbs."

"If the Blaston coke ovens were operating, could you see the smoke from here?"

"Easily. But those mills closed ten...maybe fifteen years ago."

Eli leaned toward the window, stopping short of pressing his nose to the tinted glass. "I've been here before," he said. "When it was all forest." He looked at the house. "There used to be a waterfall...a stream — "

"Could have been diverted underground," Shef said. "This area's all landfill...riddled with culverts."

Eli leaned against the glass and braced against a rush of memories.

HE WAS SEVENTEEN and walking with the spirit of Grandfather Yethwas.

"Is this a dream?" Eli asked.

"No. Your body's sleeping, but this isn't a dream."

They headed north along the fresh-asphalt streets of Wessex Glen, advancing toward the skeletal walls of Westgate. They moved with the speed of spirit walkers, covering furlongs with single steps.

Yethwas asked, "Why didn't you come south for my funeral?"

"Dad said I'd miss too much school."

"Was that the real reason?"

"No. I don't think he wanted me at the ceremony. He's a Christian. He doesn't like the old ways."

"Aren't Christian ways old ways?"

"Not to him."

Beneath their feet, a Westgate street became a field of broken stumps. Ahead loomed the edge of a sheared-off forest. Above the trees, a gibbous moon nuzzled a pocket of night.

"Where are we going?"

"To the heart of something old."

They entered the forest and followed a trail to the top of a moonlit waterfall. Beyond the cliff, empty sky stretched toward the glowing exhaust of a dying steel town. Everything in between, from falling water to rising smoke, was unbroken forest. No bricks. No asphalt. Just a shimmering ocean of wave-shaped pines.

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Yethwas sat on the mossy shale beside the falling water. "That forest," he pointed to the sea of conifers. "It isn't yours."

"Not *mine*?"

"It's the forest of your ancestors."

"What's the difference?"

"It's coniferous. The first forest was pine. Settlers killed it. When it grew back, it was deciduous — hickory, oak, walnut...."

"Why'd it change?"

"It didn't."

"But you said — "

"It didn't change. It *was* changed. There's a difference." He leaned forward, angling his body toward the abyss. "Pay attention. Things are going to happen fast." He leaned until his center of gravity cleared the precipice. But he didn't fall. He held his ground, angled like a rooted trunk, pointing west with a gnarled limb. "Do you see it?"

Eli looked, following the line of his grandfather's finger. Across the valley a wedge of moonlight struck the back of an arched sapling. The tree had been bent until its branches became a second set of roots. Now it grew with its bowed trunk in the air, forming the entrance to a darkened room.

"You're inside that room," Yethwas said.

The world turned. The waterfall's roar receded, and Eli found himself sitting on the floor of a house made of bent trees.

Yethwas stood before him, gripping a decorated pole. Carved eyes gazed from the wood — human eyes in animal faces. Yethwas asked, "What will you do when you finish school?"

Eli shrugged. "College, I guess."

"What does this mean?" Yethwas rolled his shoulders, mimicking Eli's shrug.

"I don't know. I've been accepted. What else am I going to do?"

"What will you study?"

"Maybe law."

"White man's law?"

"What else?"

Yethwas gripped the carved pole. "Let me show you." He twisted the rough-hewn point from the floor and lifted it to reveal a hole filled with quivering darkness. "Come closer." He leaned the pole against a curved

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wall and dropped to his knees. "There are things I can't tell you. I'm only a seed spreader. You'll have to harvest your own answers." He peered into the hole and beckoned with a crooked hand. "Closer."

Eli approached. "What's down there?"

"Many things. And one of them is rising." Deep in the hole, something stirred. "It's a creature that eats stone and plastic."

"Nothing eats stone and plastic," Eli said.

"It also eats meat and leaves. And wood and bone."

A dusty stink rose from the hole. Eli jerked away, snorting.

"It has no stomach, no mouth, but it is always hungry."

Eli tried clearing the stink from his nostrils.

"It can also be eaten. It can give visions and induce deathlike sleep."

Eli snorted again. "It stinks!" He felt lightheaded, as if he had inhaled a drug.

"And it burns. Our ancestors used it for tinder. Light a little, it burns. Light a lot, it explodes." His eyes glowed. "Do you know its name?"

Eli shook his head.

"You will."

"When?"

Something dark bubbled from the ground.

"You will know it the day it calls you," Yethwas said. "You will know it the day you set it free."

Darkness filled the room, and suddenly Eli was lying in his bed, head pounding, afraid to move....

The narcotic stink clung to his nostrils, filling his head with the echo of his grandfather's words. One day the thing in the hole would call for him.

He sat up and turned on the light beside his bed.

One day he would set it free.

He shivered. The dream made no sense, but somehow that made it all the more frightening.

"The kid's back," Walter said.

He patched Brenda's voice through the console's speaker: "Woneesa is tired waiting. Hayet has to come inside *now*!"

"We hear you, Brenda." Walter remained calm, focused. "We need you to stay on the line this time. We need you to tell us — "

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"No!" Her voice shrilled. "I can't tell you anything else."

"We need you to ask Woneesa — "

"Hayet can ask questions when he comes inside."

"Can Hayet bring a friend?"

"No. He comes alone!" Her voice cracked, turning jagged. "No one else has permission!"

To Jones, Eli said, "I'll do it. Let me go inside."

Walter turned off the speaker and adjusted his headset.

Jones turned through the sudden silence. He glared at Eli. "You're serious?"

"She says I'll be safe."

"You understand what you're doing? You're volunteering." He spoke slowly, making his point in the presence of witnesses. "I am not asking you to go into that house."

"I understand."

"Christ!" Walter slumped forward. "She did it again. She hung up."

"Get her back!" Jones said. "Tell her to come into the front hall. Tell her Hayet will meet her there." He stepped toward the door.

Eli followed, wincing against the blast of August heat as he left the air-conditioned van. But this time, when his feet touched the pavement, he knew exactly where he was. Even through the sheath of asphalt, he could feel the memories rising.

THREE DAYS AFTER the spirit walk with his grandfather, Eli followed the paved roads of Wessex Glen until they gave way to dusty clay.

It took twenty minutes to reach Westgate and another quarter hour to reach the forest. The trail was as he remembered, stretching beneath tall trees and ending at a fast-moving stream. He followed the currents, heading north toward the sigh of falling water.

He stopped by the cliff overlooking the wooded valley. In the distance, beyond a line of glacial hills, dense smoke rose from the Blaston ovens.

The pines were gone, replaced by a wasteland of deciduous trunks. The second-growth forest had been cleared, and now, on a barren cliff two hundred yards away, earthmoving trucks spewed dirt and rock from gaping chutes. The debris tumbled into the valley, smoking as it fanned

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over the spot where he had dreamed himself sitting in a house of bent trees.

He stepped back, sat beside the tumbling water, and watched as the valley filled with the grit of leveled hills.

Jones's voice crackled in Eli's headset. "Can you hear me?"

Eli nodded.

Jones said, "Test your microphone. Say something."

"Something."

"Funny guy." Jones reached under Eli's arm and adjusted the transmitter. "Everything feel okay?"

"Good enough."

"All right. Now Kaminski's going to hook you up." Jones moved back as the SWAT utility man approached with a coil of 7/16-inch rappelling line.

Kaminski was a stocky man with a jarhead haircut and steely eyes. He reached toward Eli's groin, where a rappelling harness formed an X across each thigh. A figure-eight ring hung from a central strap, dangling over Eli's crotch. "Don't think I'm getting fresh." Kaminski reached for the ring. "It's just my job." He looped the rappelling line through the harness. "Now we can pull you out if you get in trouble." He turned to Jones. "We're ready here."

To Eli, Jones said, "Do it like we said: prop the screen and stay in sight. You'll see the basement stairs through the kitchen. If the girl's not there, call to her."

"If she doesn't come?"

"You leave." Jones said. "No heroics. I'm not losing another man in that house. Step out of sight and Kaminski's gonna haul you back. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Ready when you are," Jones said. "Take it slow."

Eli turned and started up the walk. Through the screen, he saw the arch that led to the kitchen, the open space that must have been the living room, and a heap of gray that was now clearly the prostrate form of a fallen officer. "Nothing's moving inside." He stepped onto the front stoop, opened the screen door, and paused....

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Dust spilled past his face, drifting close and then swirling into the house.

"Something wrong, Hayet?"

"No. I'm all right." He adjusted the metal stop on the screen door's pneumatic hinge. "There's some kind of grit inside the doorframe." He reached up, slapped the aluminum molding, and watched as more grains sifted down, avoiding his face as they swirled into the house. "It looks like mold spores."

The Sun tossed a blade of dusty light across the carpet. Beyond the swirling motes, the Creek officer lay with his arms folded beneath his chest. The dust had piled around him, drifting like gray sand.

Eli stepped inside, crouched, and set a hand against the officer's jaw. The flesh quivered. Eli turned toward the open screen, looking toward Jones and Kaminski. "There's a pulse."

Jones signaled the paramedics.

Kaminski said, "Don't move him, Hayet!"

But the fallen officer was already rousing, rolling onto his back and looking up with glazed eyes.

Eli held him steady. "Easy now."

The officer coughed, his breath misting in the low-angled light.

"Just take it easy."

The officer gripped Eli's arm, clinging fast as Eli helped him to his feet. Together, they moved down the hall, through the front door, and out to the waiting paramedics — none of whom seemed eager to enter the house without Woneesa's permission.

Eli returned to the hall and proceeded to the edge of the living room. "There's a man on the couch, slumped over, face down. He's covered with dust." He noticed other things, too: mold creeping from baseboards and webs sprouting from sockets and rheostats. The air shimmered with drifting spores, none of which came near him. It was as if each grain were aware of his presence, as if the dust were holding back — creating a breathing space that followed him through the house.

Jones asked, "Do you see the girl?"

Eli turned and stepped toward the kitchen. "No. The basement's closed." Thick dust covered the counter, muting the contours of a toaster,

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a microwave oven, and an assortment of knives in a butcher-block holder. Dust sifted over the counter's edge, falling onto the bodies that lay between the hall and the basement. "I see your second officer," Eli said. "And a woman, face down, early-to-mid forties. I assume it's Mrs. Driscol." Covered in gray dust, she looked almost like an unfinished statue.

"I need to get closer." Eli turned toward the front door, meeting the anxious stares of Jones, Kaminski, and the waiting SWAT team. In the center of the courtyard, paramedics lifted the first officer into the back of a Tri-Valley Ambulance. In the distance, sirens wailed. Another ambulance was on its way. "I need to step out of the hall. I'll be out of sight for less than a minute."

A deliberating silence, and then: "All right, Hayet. Go for it. Stay in voice contact. Keep talking."

He entered the kitchen.

Nothing he had seen in the hall or the living room had prepared him for what spilled from the cabinets beneath the sink. There, five feet from Mrs. Driscol's spore-covered body, lay a tangled mass of tendrils and fluttering webs. They stretched from the darkness, pushing the cabinet doors to reveal pipes overgrown with fungal twine....

"Hayet! Talk to us!"

He turned toward the spore-covered body of Mrs. Driscol. "I'm kneeling beside the woman." He reached for her. Spores fanned away from his hand, scrolling back in two feathery arcs as they left the body. The woman trembled as he turned her over. "Her eyes are open. Pupils dilated." Her skin was pale but unmarked, free of the plethoric tattoos that should have been evident in flesh that had lain for a week on hard linoleum. The spores had preserved her — knocked her out, but kept her whole.

He helped her to her feet. Together, they left the kitchen and stepped into the light of the rising morning.

The others were the same: not dead, merely unconscious, needing only his touch to bring them around. One by one, he led them into the light and delivered them to the waiting arms and gurneys of the Creek Township paramedics. And through it all, the girl remained silent. No phone call to the command van. No cry from the basement.

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"The hall," Jones said, his voice buzzing in the headset. "Stay in the hall this time. Give her one more chance to come to you."

Something stirred beneath the floor as Eli reentered the hall. "I think I hear her."

She called again, her voice rising through the boards, welling to a shriek.

"I need to go down for her."

The rappelling cord pulled at his waist, keeping him in the hall as he leaned into the kitchen. The cries coalesced, forming words: "*Down! Come down! Help me!*"

Eli tugged at the cord. "Let me go after her!" He turned toward the open screen.

In the courtyard, the SWAT commandos were donning their gas-and-particle gear. Jones stood at the end of the walk, cutting the air with a backward wave. "You're coming out, Hayet. We're moving in."

Kaminski tugged the line.

Eli caught himself on the counter. Blades clattered in their butcher-block holder. "Wait!" He kept his right hand out of sight as he reached for the knives. "Don't pull." He grabbed a knife and slid it free. "Let me walk out on my own."

Kaminski relaxed. Eli stepped forward, grabbed the line, and brought out the knife. Jones saw it. He barked a broken question, something Eli barely heard as Kaminski once again tugged the line — hard.

Eli flew forward and slammed the sunlit carpet with a bone-bruising thud. The knife rasped away from the cord. Eli rolled and brought the blade down again, struggling to hold it steady as Kaminski hauled him toward the door.

Filaments popped, snapping like tendons beneath the running blade. Eli looked up, squinting as he raced into the full flare of the sun. Another second and he'd be outside, skidding against the flagstones....

He pivoted, angling his legs to catch the doorframe. WHAM! The knife slipped again, slicing his skin and drawing a ribbon of blood that curved across his forearm and onto the carpet.

Kaminski pulled harder. Eli resisted, fighting back with burning muscles as he gave the cord a final slash.

The line skittered away, recoiling like a headless snake.

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Eli dropped the knife, scrambled to his feet, and raced toward the kitchen.

The courtyard fell silent behind him. The SWAT officers stayed at ready. One gas grenade would stop him, but no one fired.

Eli stormed across the dusty linoleum, threw open the basement door, and rushed headlong into a squall of spores.

Brenda shrieked louder — her voice rising from the foot of the stairs.

"She's right below me," Eli said. "I'm going down."

"What's happening? Describe the scene!"

"The air's thick with spores. Swirling around me. Keeping their distance." He looked up. "Ceiling's filthy. Mold hanging like rotting cloth. Webs covering everything." He continued his descent, walking on mycelium knots. The stairs creaked, sounding brittle, dried by the leaching of the fungal sheath.

"Do you see the girl?"

"No." He reached bottom and stepped out onto a carpet of webs.

"Where are you now?"

"Foot of the stairs." He turned. A pulsing membrane fluttered beside him. "There's something here. Something huge." The mass coalesced as he advanced, undulating like a floor-to-ceiling cocoon, and finally solidifying as his hand closed over it. His fingers tingled with the shock of recognition. "It's a sheet," he said, looking up to see a blackened clothesline stretching beneath the ceiling's pipes and beams. "A wall of hanging sheets." He found a point where two sheets overlapped, parted them, and looked in at the vacant eyes of a teenage girl. "I've found her!"

"Is she alone?"

Eli peered through the gale of spores. "I can't tell."

"Is she all right?"

Eli paused, trying to decipher the scene that sprawled before him. "No," he said, wanting to run, unable to move. "She is not all right." Then, more softly: "Christ almighty."

Brenda's eyes turned toward him, staring through the shifting dust. Her mouth opened. The void behind her teeth looked black and deep. Her voice emerged like a rising darkness. "Who you talking to?" she asked. "Who — ?"

Her words faded beneath Jones's roar: "Is she alone? Talk to us, Hayet!"

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He stared, taking in details as his mind adjusted to the horror. He saw ordinary things first: a coiled garden hose, a humming humidifier, and a simmering hotpot. Steam mingled with drifting spores. Brenda Driscol had done more than build an underground apartment. She had created an incubator.

"Talk to us, Hayet. Is she alone?"

"No." His gaze settled on the thing that sprawled behind her. "She's not alone."

Again, Brenda Driscol asked: "Who you talking to?"

She had positioned her incubator over a concave section of floor. In the center of the space, slime bubbled from a grate-covered drain. Fibrous hyphae grew from the slime, radiating across the concrete, over pipes, up walls, and onto the ceiling....

A shattered cell phone lay in a corner. The girl's limp hand dangled above the receiver. Clinging filaments grew along her arm....

"Goddamnit, Hayet! Talk to us!"

She reclined on her back, her shoulders propped against massing tendrils, her body blanketed deep in a fungal cocoon. Thready creepers grew about her, clinging with hairlike hapterons — fibers that gripped her skin with tiny hooks.

To Jones, Eli said, "I'm going to try bringing her out."

The hapterons shifted, tugging Brenda Driscol's cheek and temple, pulling her expression into a half grimace. In a voice as dusty as the air, she asked, "Is it *them*? Are you talking to *them*...the *others*...the *people outside*?"

"Yes." He pointed to the headset's microphone. "We're working to get you — "

Her hand blurred toward him, missing his nose and arcing away with a sound of cracking plastic and snapping wire.

"No one else," she said, gripping his detached microphone. "Later you can talk to the others. Now you talk to me."

She turned and tossed the microphone into a drift of spores. A ropy mass extended from the back of her head, flaring like a scolex at the base of her scalp.

"Me," she said again, turning to face him. "Now you talk to *me*."

He realized that *me* was not Brenda Driscol. Her body had become a

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mouthpiece, a symbiotic extension of the thing that had grown through the grate in the floor.

"What are you?" he asked.

"Ask your grandfather."

"He's dead."

"Then find the answers in — "

"Hayet!" Jones's voice boomed, drowning out the creature's words. "Who's with the girl? Talk to us!"

Eli looked into the creature's symbiotic eyes. "You used the girl to call me here?"

"Yeah."

"You killed her to get to me?"

"No." The voice changed, deepening, becoming thicker. "I'm not ready to kill. Soon maybe. Not yet. All the people will recover if — "

"Hayet! Respond goddamnit!"

"If what?"

Hapterons quivered, pulling the girl's lips into an awkward grin. "Leave. Take the girl. Leave now, but remember me. Remember my power. Remember what — "

"Hayet! We're coming in!"

The girl's eyes rolled, seeming to glow as they looked around at the dangling fungus and swarming spores. "It burns." Her voice rasped, sounding old and masculine. "Our ancestors used it for tinder." It was his grandfather's voice. "Light a little, it burns. Light a lot — " She seemed to flinch as the hapterons pulled from her skin. "It explodes."

The scolex released her head. Her body slumped forward.

Eli caught her. She felt like a bundle of rags, her body shriveled from its week with Woneesa. He stood, holding her close as a kitchen window shattered. A grenade slammed the linoleum. Eli heard the hiss of incendiary tear gas.

With Brenda in his arms, Eli turned and thundered up the stairs. More glass shattered as he rushed into the kitchen. The second grenade sputtered as it careened off the dishwasher and rebounded toward the basement.

He closed his eyes against the gas, not opening them until he reached the hall. Through acid tears he saw the SWAT team storming up the walk. "No!" He rasped. "Get away!"

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Something huge grabbed him from behind. His feet left the floor. He ran on air, hurling forward like a ball in a musket — propelled by a force so loud it registered only as pain. The SWAT team dropped, and he sailed over them, somersaulting with Brenda Driscol still in his arms. The world wheeled before his tumbling face. He saw the ground. He saw Jones and Kaminski. He saw the sky flecked with smoke and scattering debris....

His head slammed the flagstone walk. The girl landed atop him and skidded away, arms and legs flailing like knotted cords.

And then — for a moment that transcended time — he felt nothing.

He lay on his back, gazing up at the blackening sky, watching the spores rise and scatter as a darkness settled, slipped inside, and wrapped him in a cocoon of unconsciousness....

HE WAS WITH the spirit of Grandfather Yethwas.

"Is this a dream?" Eli asked.

"No," His grandfather said. "*We* are dreams. *This* is real."

They stood in the rear compartment of a speeding ambulance. Bags of fluid dangled from aluminum trees. Transparent tubes ran through pump boxes and into the arms of an unconscious man. Paramedics worked in hasty silence — cutting the front of a Hathaway shirt, peeling the cotton, and dotting the exposed chest with the colored disks of an EKG monitor. Eli watched in bemusement.

There is nothing stranger to a man than the three-dimensional image of his own face. Throughout life he may see his features reversed in mirrors or pressed flat in the emulsion of photographs, but the face itself remains forever hidden behind his gaze. Looking at the battered man, Eli felt a strange twinge — a hazy sense that he knew the dying stranger.

He moved closer. The ambulance rocked as the road veered left. Hanging bags swayed. A siren clicked on. Lights flashed beyond the windows, pulsing as Eli looked at the face on the blood-flecked pillow. His gaze dropped to the left arm, crusty with blood from a diagonal wound. He felt the ache of broken bones and lacerated flesh.

"It's me," he said.

His grandfather nodded as a paramedic turned and opened an overhead cabinet. The cabinet door swung through his grandfather's face — in

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one side and out the other — as if Grandfather Yethwas were nothing more than a plume of smoke. "You broke your neck on the front walk," Yethwas said. "The wound will add to the legend. By the time you regain consciousness, you will be a hero."

"Me?"

Yethwas took Eli's arm, pulling him away from the gurney, turning him toward the back of the ambulance. "I'll show you." They stepped toward the doors. "Walk with me."

A suburban street raced beyond the rear windows.

"Walk where?"

"You'll see."

The glass parted as Yethwas led him out into rushing air, across straw-covered lawns, and toward the smoke of a burning home. News reporters stood with their backs to the rising cloud.

"They will call it the Killer House," Yethwas said. "And when they interview Maurice, he'll tell them that its victims came alive when you touched them."

"But they weren't dead."

"People will believe otherwise."

"It was the spores. The spores kept the bodies sedated until — "

"People know what they see," Yethwas said. "And Kaminski saw you fly from the exploding home. He will tell his story over and over...and every time he does you will fly higher." Yethwas kept walking — down Morningside Drive and into the burning ruin of the Driscol home. In the flames, gritty flecks darted skyward, spreading out as they reached a ledge of cooling air.

Yethwas looked skyward, watching the plume as it feathered westward. "It will descend on new developments," he said.

"It?"

"The cloud of spores. Our ancestors called it *Unehsa*."

The name echoed in Eli's memory. "Woneesa," he said. "The Driscol girl called it Woneesa."

"The old tongue in a young mouth," Yethwas said.

"*Unehsa*." Eli spoke the name slowly.

"The last time it rose, my father was its *ha-tseest-atsi*."

"Is that Iroquois?"

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"Iroquois-Mingo. It means missionary. It was your great-grandfather who scattered the seeds of the second forest."

"By himself?"

Yethwas nodded. "*Unehsa* made him powerful, but his job was easy compared to yours. This time, *Unehsa* will need a greater hero."

They spirit-walked into a new scene. Timber rotted on lilting skids. Earthmovers sat mired on corroded tires. Hard-hatted workers lay prostrate on the naked earth. Everywhere, spores swarmed like locusts.

"You're saying I'll make this happen?" Eli asked. "I'll help *Unehsa* destroy construction sites?" The words tasted bitter. "What kind of hero — ?"

"A people's hero." Yethwas turned in place, taking in the landscape of crumbling hardware. "*Unehsa* will rain over new developments. Spores will clog engines, rot tires, and devour supplies. Workers will have visions. But those things won't be enough. Someone will need to offer a solution, a plan for coexistence." Yethwas turned and started up a gentle rise, a mound of earth capped with a fringe of yellow grass.

Eli followed. "What plan?"

Yethwas paused at the top of the rise. He spoke without turning. "You lost your way, Grandson. *Unehsa* will help you find it again, provided you're strong enough to change."

Eli moved toward him, climbing into a cool breeze as he reached the top of the rise.

"Your father took his name from the Mingo," Yethwas said. "He thought *Hayet* sounded more American than *Yethwas*, but they are both part of the same word — *hayethwas*, one-who-plants."

A great valley stretched below them, lush and green.

"You will plant ideas." He turned to Eli. "If you are strong enough."

The air darkened with evening indigo.

"Are you up to the challenge?"

Soft lights winked through the valley trees, and Eli realized he was looking at Sara River's open-space community — pockets of multifamily homes between swatches of healthy forest and undiverted streams — a landscape that developers had insisted could never be sold.

Yethwas said, "Sara River has the blueprint. If it succeeds, others will follow."

Eli stepped toward the valley's edge. He felt the wind on his face. Breathing deep, he smelled the scent of life.

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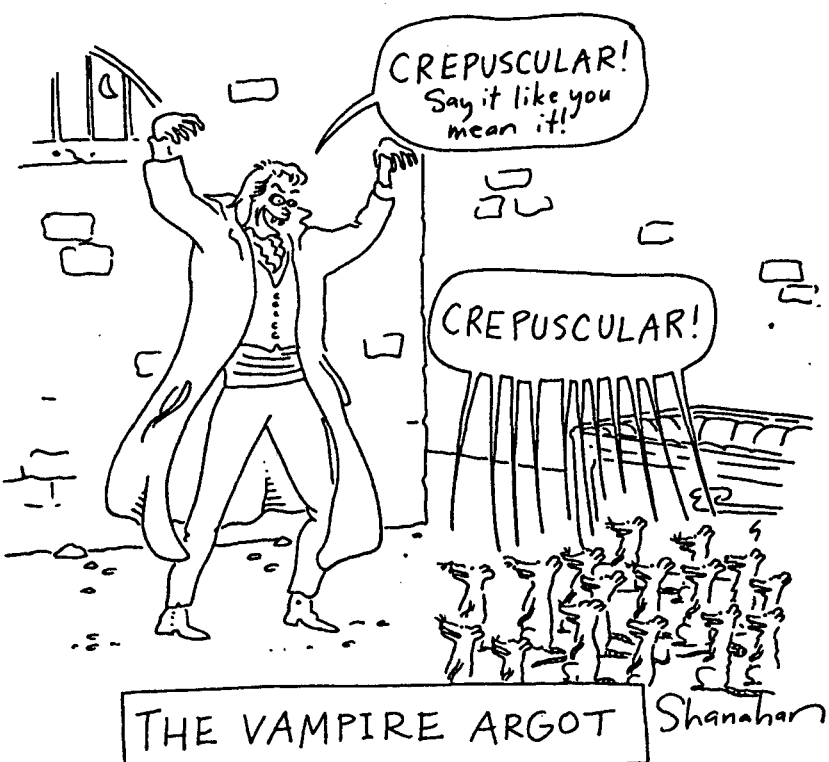
"Are you up to the challenge, Grandson?"

Within himself, Eli felt something rising — a quickening of suppressed spirit that sprang from the pit of his heart. He had been shown the way as a child, but it took the man to discover what had to be done. "I'm up to it," he said. "I'm ready."

The scene faded. He closed his eyes. And in the moment before he awoke to pain and wailing sirens, he sensed the strengthening pulse of the forest's heart...and he knew that he had reclaimed his soul.



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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD &
ELISABETH MALARTRE

THE COMING OF THE CYBORGS

THE NEXT decade promises another qualitative shift in the way we view technology, when old ideas condense into firm, available objects — robots, cyborg parts, and the many variations in between.

The coming of the robots will be obvious, just a few years away now. They will first work inside buildings with well-defined geometries, carrying paperwork or packages. Then they will be security guards, prowling company corridors through the night, using infrared vision in dark areas. We will leave a robot house-sitter behind when we go on trips, checking in over the internet to see — literally — what's going on.

Soon robots will be everywhere, performing surgery, exploring hazardous places, making rescues, fighting fires, and handling heavy goods. After a decade or two, they will be as unremarkable as the computer screen is now in offices, airports, or restaurants. Each new advance will create a momentary flurry of excitement, but the robots will increasingly blend in.

The coming of the cyborgs will be subtle. At first these additions to the human body will be interior, as rebuilt joints, elbows, and hearts are now. Then larger adjuncts will appear, perhaps on people's heads or limbs. Soon we will cross the line between repair and augmentation, probably first in sports medicine, then spreading to everyone who wants to make a body perform better than it ordinarily could. Controversy will arise, with many saying we are assuming more power than people should have over themselves. But such sentiments will not stop the desire to be better than we are; they never have.

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Human self-change and robotic development are poles of the same general phenomenon, though an ever-shifting terrain. Some fields will surge ahead while others will simply fade away, and new, more promising approaches will emerge. But the broader implications of imminent change will remain.

Science has often followed cultural anticipation, not led it. Fiction and film have meditated upon the upcoming social issues of robots and cyborgs for well over a century.

Much technology, and even science, is connected firmly with its social context, and has even arisen from it. For example, in 1932 physicist Leo Szilard read H. G. Wells's 1914 novel, *The World Set Free*, which predicted the discovery of artificial radioactivity in 1933 — a direct hit, as it turned out. The novel depicted atomic power, bombs, and a world war between an alliance of England, France, and perhaps the U.S., against Germany and Austria. Wells's fictional bombs probably began the misnomer "atomic" instead of "nuclear," but they did work by "chain reactions." The novel was dedicated to Frederick Soddy, whose study of radium gave Wells the idea. Szilard saw the possibility of such weapons, and for decades was a central driver toward first making and then controlling them. He got Einstein's signature on the letter to President Roosevelt that launched the Manhattan Project.

Often research in human augmentation and robotics stems from speculations and projections in the surrounding culture. Many cultures have imagined altering ourselves and duplicating human abilities in machines. Much modern science fiction has imagined and thought through the personal and social effects of doing this, in well realized, realistic narratives. Such work can be a valuable guide to navigating the ever-rushing waters of change in the next century.

Can we be better?

The urge to improve upon the human body is at least as old as our species. It dates back to the first time a proto-human picked up a rock to smash a bone to reach the hidden marrow, or used a stick to help dig down to a tender root.

That edge allowed us not only to survive but to dominate the planet. We use other objects, now call it technology, and treat our tools and machines as though they are separate from us. But they are simply augmentations of our bodies,

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and have always been. They make us stronger and faster, and they restore hearing and vision.

The first question any seer into the future should ask is not what is technically possible, but rather, what is acceptable to people. Regarding cyborgs, two common assumptions seem dubious. First, that people will readily take to invasive technology. Second, that wedding the human brain to computer assistance will be simple, and will come soon.

By advancing beyond our current forms, we can better look back and define ourselves — a theme we meet often in sf. All the terms used to describe the coming forms that will go beyond the human norm — androids, cyborgs, bionic people, robots — summon up the question of what it means, deep down, to be human.

Is it athletic prowess? (Probably not fundamental, but often depicted in films because it is easy to show.)

Intellect? (But computers press our abilities in many areas already.)

Creativity? (How creative is chess?—yet the world champion is now a computer.)

Ever since the 19th-century song "John Henry," we have given grudging ground to machine capabilities. ("He was a steel-drivin' man, and he drove that steel as fast as he can..." but after beating the new rail-laying machine, he fell dead of exhaustion.)

A still greater anxiety lies below all these terms: the description of human parts as machinelike, and replacing them with actual machines, summons up the question of how much we are already essentially mechanical, right down to our minds. Hovering behind this nervousness lie questions of free will and just how much we truly control ourselves. This weds with Freud's revelations about unglimpsed impulses emerging from our unconscious. Who wants to go *there*?

Some do — if only to make a buck. In myriad science fiction films, autonomous humanlike beings betray all manner of human responses to the world. Some get away with it.

In 1984's film *The Terminator*, the killer robot gets more adept at imitating humans as it moves through Los Angeles. When someone addresses it, a pull-down menu of possible responses appears in its field of view, ranging from swear words to polite evasions. It learns to imitate voices from a single sentence, so it can fool others over the

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telephone, even getting right the tones of a mother's concern so that her daughter suspects nothing (a truly terrifying scene, quietly delivered).

Such adaptability and skill at seeming human, while not being truly so, calls up a fundamental fear that we will not be able to use our ancient primate skills of sight, sound, and smell to detect machine deceptions. In the film, dogs can smell killer robots, but not after the robots learn to grow human skin over their metal bodies.

Similarly, the robotic women in the 1975 film *The Stepford Wives* still seem sexy to men who know full well they are fake. This raises the uneasy question of whether we will be willing to go along with machines pretending to be human if they satisfy our hungers and are reasonably adept. Some of us will simply not care whether others are robots or cyborgs, and will treat them all as objects to be used.

Analyzing ourselves as machines quickly calls forth those who argue that something mystically human transcends our physical basis. This blends into the concept of "emergent phenomena" — recognizing that very complex behavior can come from simple rules. The seemingly infinite complexity of human culture could emerge, this suggests, from fairly simple patterns of logic, laid down long ago in the human mind and body by evolutionary pressures.

Increasingly, science fiction writers have spoken for the widespread, gut-level stresses we feel. Androids as sexual partners appeared in such titles as *The Silver Metal Lover* (Tanith Lee, 1982) and *The Hormone Jungle* (Robert Reed, 1988). The literature resounds with the earlier themes of robot revolution, machine takeover of society, and duplication of people without anyone knowing. These make for simple plot structures but seldom explore the depth that coming technology seems likely to force us to face.

Even so influential a film as 1982's *Blade Runner* expressed profound anxiety about "androids" who were in fact completely fabricated humans, apparently made of organic parts, though with short life spans. They are termed "replicants" — as if they were mere replicas of us. This future rain-drenched Los Angeles features artificial animals (because the real ones are extinct) and many sickly humans (because most of humanity has left the polluted planet). Android replicants can be spotted with an empathy test,

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because they don't have any "real" feelings toward the natural world; they aren't part of it, after all.

The mere fact that these terms are routinely scrambled — 'droids, 'bots, replicants, bionics — and blithely misused in the popular culture tells us something also. *All* artificial forms are suspect.

People assembled from cadaver parts are certainly not to be trusted. Moviegoers have consistently called the most famous monster "Frankenstein," but in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel, *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, it is the name of the creator. This most famous of all modern humanlike creations, fashioned from dead body parts, is the work of horrific overambition. It expresses the fear that our creations can put us in their dark, looming shadow. The enormous cultural legacy of *Frankenstein* speaks to us now, nearly two centuries since a young woman created those images and ideas, of how much we distrust any attempt to ape or surpass us.

Can we go too far in making ourselves machinelike, or making machines resemble us? Many feel so already. And once made, will such creatures be like us, but end up not *liking* us?

These questions will arise in myriad ways in the next few decades, as we press today against boundaries that just a short while ago we met only in works of the imagination.

Take a concrete example — running. Ever since Puss in Boots's seven-league boots, people have dreamed of being able to run faster than humanly possible. The first modern superhero, Superman, can "leap tall buildings at a single bound," besides being able to fly by no visible mechanical mechanism at all.

Okay, it's a metaphor. Taking it semirealistically, though, all this is clearly impossible if we are confined to flesh and blood, but what about bionic assist?

The bionic man and woman from the old TV series had superspeed, but we never saw the nuts and bolts of how it was accomplished. Without limits, things get crazy. The zany 1993 clay animation film from Nick Park, *The Wrong Trousers*, postulated a pair of unstoppable robotic trousers.

But seriously, how close are we to super-speed, or even walking robots? Human walking, it turns out, is very difficult for machines to master. Walking on two legs demands movable joints, a pelvis,

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precise coordination among major muscle groups in the legs, and the action of stretchy tendons. If any of these components is missing or diminished, people have various problems with mobility, or can't walk at all.

To achieve upright balance, the body has gravity sensors in the inner ear (the cochlea) and mechanoreceptors (stretch receptors) in skeletal muscles. Together they tell the brain which way is up and which muscles are working, and enable it to program the legs to walk. At a minimum, eight leg muscles are required to stand; another eight are needed to walk. Graceful walking requires the help of even more muscles. Walking is actually a series of short forward falls, and the body is saved by moving a leg to the front at just the right time.

The balancing required in upright walking is still difficult for the human brain, even though our ancestors started doing it several millions of years ago. It's easy to lose the ability to balance if the muscles aren't exercised regularly, and falling is one of the most common symptoms of old age or failing health.

It's extraordinarily difficult to construct a mechanical device that can walk smoothly on two legs. (The old joke about being able to walk and chew gum simultaneously was not far wrong.) In Japan the Honda motor company spent more than a decade, and millions of dollars, on a robot that can walk as well as climb and descend stairs.

But that's *all* it can do. Other robotics experts wonder if it was worth all the trouble. Joe Engelberger, one of the founding fathers of robotic devices, feels that wheeled robots are the most practical, due to the design problems of walking ones. Many other roboticists agree with him.

Nonetheless, the work at MIT's Leg Lab and elsewhere continues, in part because of the interest in helping amputees and paralyzed victims of spinal cord injuries. Designing mechanical devices that walk naturally helps the scientists understand how a person walks. Then they can help create better prostheses for amputees, as well as sensor and control systems for paraplegics.

Take the most profound human limitation—mortality.

The oldest person whose age is reliably known was Jeanne Louise Calment of Arles, France, who lived from 1875 to 1997, achieving 122 years, 5 months. She had sold pencils to the young, unknown Vincent

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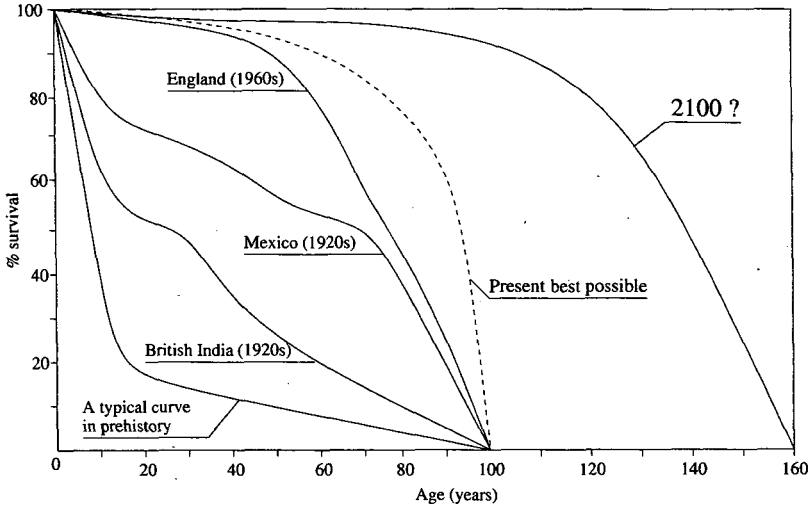

van Gogh. As the mortality curve here shows, there are two major stories taught by history about improving longevity.

First, the dramatic improvement has come mostly from the better survival rates of children. In a state of nature, children fall prey to cold, disease, and accident at high rates. Better sanitation, medicine, and nutrition have made their gains throughout the 20th century. This explains why the curve for Mexico in the 1920s differs greatly from British India at the same era: India had yet to enjoy the improvements slowly diffusing from the advanced nations, while Mexico had already received them. Note that the difference between England of the 1960s and Mexico of the 1920s came mostly from lower child mortality rates.

Second, the elderly death rate has shown some reduction, but not a lot. There is still a fairly solid "wall" around age eighty, and beyond it, the population declines roughly exponentially. One might term this the "fragility wall" where people become prey to any passing microbe or severe accident. Their resistance and resilience has eroded until they are easy marks.

We all take extending longevity as something good to be sought. Some will carp about increased costs to Social Security, or population growth, but getting more out of a single life also promises huge gains,

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many of them economic, as people work to greater age. Given the search for more years, it is surprising that there is so little research into the deeper questions of how to push back the age frontier. Is there a basic limit? And is it the same for us all?

Notably, since 1900 — when the death rates of the sexes were just about the same — women have consistently gained extra years of longevity over men, until now they live about ten percent longer in advanced societies. Few take note of this remarkable inequality, which is still increasing after a century. Females consume more than two-thirds of health care budgets, and are consistently heavier users of health services throughout their lives. Upgrading male longevity to the level of females' in the advanced societies would improve the average human survival more than, say, completely eliminating cancer. This strongly suggests that social forces have a great deal to do with improving our expected lifespans, beyond the reach of technologies alone.

The other major factor affecting longevity is prosperity. Wealthy societies fare better. Medical technology is a major cause, leading one to ask if augmenting people will lead to longer lives. Certainly radical technologies like nanotech would profoundly affect longevity, allowing replacement of cellular materials and direct, pointed interventions in major causes of death today, diseases like cancer and arterial blockage. Even simple mechanical aids like better legs and hips could prevent the often-devastating falls among the elderly.

The curve labeled *Present best possible* is a guess at what might be achieved by present technologies on all fronts. Shoring up the elderly could plausibly lead to the dashed curve within about fifty years.

After all, in the advanced nations the average longevity has increased fifty percent in the last century. A similar improvement would take us to a curve that terminates somewhere between 100 and 110 — a cotton-topped future. But technology changes, and the advances from augmentation plausibly can keep making inroads on the many causes of our mortality.

The curve labeled *2100?* is of course my pure guess, building on the successes of the past century. It assumes the "fragility wall" around age eighty has been thoroughly broken down, with another fifty percent increase beyond the *Present best possible* curve. This line is not a serious prediction, but a suggestion of how much augmentation

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would change our views of the human condition.

We have no true idea of an upper limit on lifespan. If we eliminated all aging, so that we faced no "fragility wall," eliminated diseases, and could avoid all causes of death except accident (including suicide), how long could we live? Most people, when asked, guess at ages like 120, or 150. The answer gathered from death rate tables is astonishing: close to 1500 years! This seems more plausible when one reflects upon how many friends die of accident. Typically, one knows only a few who die in accidents before age fifty, from a total of, say, 1000 friends. This translates to a death rate of order 1/1000 per year, or an average expected lifespan of about 1000 years.

With only a century or less of life, humans have developed many social forms to deal with this span, and nearly none that look beyond it. Take just a small step into that immensity: Imagine living to 150. How would you plan a career? A marriage?

With augmented bodies, new social problems will arise. I'll take up those next time, as they may be the most profound implication of the path the cyborg will lead us to follow.

Comments on this column welcome at *gbenford@uci.edu*, or Physics Dept., Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92697. This column was based in part on the PBS TV show and book *Beyond Human* by GB and Elisabeth Malartre.

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Over the past decade, Rod Garcia has been one of our most popular and most inventive contributors. His fantasy and sf stories tend to be lushly imagined adventures painted boldly on a broad canvas. This new story is a fantasy of just this sort: a lovely imaginative adventure concerning death herself and what befalls her. Look for more stories in this same world of Markovy to come to us in the years ahead.

Death in Love

By R. Garcia y Robertson

Sea Beggars

EROS GRIMACED, AS CUTE as only the God of Love can be, his gloved hand hovering over a glass box full of hissing adders. "M'Lady knows how I hate being a hero."

Lady Kore nodded, all too aware of her page's limitations. Eros might be a demi-god, but he was young, flighty, and male, never pretending to be brave, or strong, or the least trustworthy. True godhead lay beyond his grasp. Still, he had his uses, and he was family — Kore's first cousin. "No one expects heroics from you," she assured him. "Just stand alongside me looking sweet."

Eros brightened visibly. "Or better yet, behind you?"

"As you wish." She smiled at the idea of this strapping blond demi-god, trying to find cover behind her tiny body. Lady Death was small, even for a woman. "Now I need another snake," she told him. "A big one."

He hesitated, his gloved hand inches above the snakes, whose bright

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green scales gleamed like polished jade beads in the sunlit air. Perched atop Seagate's second-highest tower, the white marble serpentarium had tall glass windows overlooking the sparkling green Sound with its purple islands fading one into the other. Black ships rode at anchor below, their masts rising like a thick pine forest on the sea. "You could do this so much easier," Eros complained.

"True," Kore admitted. She had grown up handling poisonous snakes, and at twelve she could lie still and naked in a bed of vipers, or kiss the nose of a striking cobra — yet her handsome cousin-german had to get over his fear. "But handling snakes is good for you," she pointed out.

"How so?" Sweat beaded on his cutely knit brow.

"Snakes teach still attention," she explained. "And instant reaction, both qualities we shall shortly need. It would be better if you took off your gloves."

Eros grimaced again. "You said that I need only look sweet," he reminded her. Drawing a deep breath, he snatched at the box.

His hand came out holding an adder just behind the head. Staring in queasy arm's-length fascination, he brought the twisting snake slowly over to her, its tail lashing his mailed sleeve. With enemies at the gate, even Love wore armor. "Will this one do, pretty cousin?"

"Perfect." Saying a swift protection spell, she reached past the fangs, taking the venomous snake in her bare hand. Shining brown-green scales felt cool and familiar between her fingers. Like most witches Lady Kore was left-handed, and her white sacrificial gown buttoned tightly from wrist to elbow with carved child-bone studs. Loose sleeves led to horrible mistakes. She carried the struggling snake to the milking table, intoning a sonorous chant adders found soothing. Spring sunlight streamed onto the tabletop, reflecting off a venom cup standing amid vials, powders, and potion rings. A flat throwing knife in a tooled leather scabbard lay at the end of a short strap, looking like a doll's sword and belt. Alongside it sat an apple.

Holding up the snake, she spoke softly to the blunt hideous face, "I am sorry to scare you. We mean no harm, but we need your power, some of your innocent deadliness. I will try to do good with it."

Beady eyes glared back at her, not at all mollified. Too bad. Kore knew how the snake felt, boxed in by enemies and beset for no reason. Black

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ships dotted the Sound below — many more than were welcome — and Seagate was besieged by men Kore did nothing to harm. Sea Beggars had descended on the Narrows, spreading woe in their wake. Kore knew the tall carrack in command, the *Mermaid*, infamous from here to the Far Isles. Two smaller carracks, *Nymph* and *Tempest*, watched over the seaward approaches to the Narrows. Row barges, barques, and light galleys led by the galeass *Scorpion* had cut Seagate off from the Sound. Any of these vessels would have been unwelcome; taken together they were a catastrophe. The Sea Beggars had captured the docks and water gate, and breeched the outer bailey. An attack on the inner ward had just been turned back — leaving Kore no time to get this snake's permission.

Hooking the adder's long fangs over the lip of the venom cup, she milked the poison glands with her fingertips. Twin gleaming threads of amber venom ran into the cup. Eros shuddered. "Moments like this make me glad I am a man."

"Playing with snakes and poisons does not appeal to you?"

"Not the least."

"Come, you've been in battle. That cannot be much better. What is it like to stand in the front rank, thrusting your boarding pike at some hulking wild-eyed berserk trying to slash you in half?"

"That is when I wish I was a woman," he replied primly.

At least Love did not lie. When she had enough venom, she handed the adder back to Eros. "Here, find him a rat. But carefully, he still has plenty of bite."

Eros took the serpent gingerly, fairly radiating caution. By the time he returned she had refilled her pearl venom ring, and had the viper's tongue in her hand. Touching the steel tip into the venom, she drew back on the stopper, watching as the amber liquid disappeared into the hollow steel shaft. When she had drained the cup, she picked up a pinch of cork and stuck it onto the needle sharp point, careful not to prick herself. Latching the silver stopper, she slid the viper's tongue under the crescent-moon comb in her hair.

Wiping the cup out with her finger, she touched it to her own tongue, feeling the tingle of fresh venom. As Demi-Goddess of Death, she had venom in her blood, given to her in small doses ever since she was a child. She held her finger out to Eros. "Here, try some. It numbs the tongue."

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Eros shivered at the suggestion. "I will take M'Lady's word."

She laughed, slipping potion rings onto her fingers. "Come, the Sea Beggars are waiting. You will shortly wish you were back juggling adders. Blindfolded."

Her page bowed. "Without a doubt." Eros never deigned to hide his concern. Lady Kore liked that, hoping to tap that well-honed sense of self-preservation. Taking the flat throwing knife and scabbard from the table, she lifted her white sacrificial skirt, strapping the knife to her thigh. Eros looked on in grim amusement, "Does M'Lady need a hand?"

She smiled at the compliment. Cousin Eros could keep his hands to himself. Cousin or not, he was still a man, young, good-looking, and the God of Love, and from what her serving women said, very athletic in bed. But Kore had long ago given up playing under the blankets with boy cousins. Female descent and male ambition led naturally to ritual incest. Cousins married cousins, and sisters slept with brothers to keep family keeps and castles from passing to strangers. Eros had no sisters to seduce. If he wanted to claim any of the family holdings he must marry one of his cousins — preferably Kore, or her little sister Persephone. Or face being a homeless deity. Having no sisters meant all his mother's holdings, even the castle Eros was raised in, would one day come to Kore, something Eros never forgot.

Standing up, she let her skirt fall back down to her ankles. Stretching out her arms and fingers, she could feel the knife on her thigh, the rings on her fingers, and the silver viper's tongue in her hair. There was even a spring-loaded blade in her left boot. She shivered. Being decked from head to foot with blades and potions was not a pleasant sensation, but she was the Demi-Goddess of Death, Dark Daughter to the Goddess-on-Earth. Her own mortality was always before her, and she accepted her death, hoping only to have a daughter one day to raise in her place. Now she must go down to the breach to parley with the besiegers, where she could not count on chivalry to protect her, not from Sea Beggars. Witches were beyond the pale. No promise made to witches need be kept. No flags of truce need be honored. If the Sea Beggars seized her, they could sell her to some local landgraf for burning. Or throw her into the Sound with an anchor stone tied to her ankles. And no one could lift a hand to save her, not even dear cousin Eros who found her so pretty.

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So Kore must see to her own safety. She took the apple off the table, slipping it into a secret pocket, and saying to Eros, "Order the bowmen to hold their fire. Then meet me at the gate." Bowing obediently, he opened the big bronze door for her. Serving women waited outside the serpentarium, ready to help her into the stiff cloth-of-gold surcoat that fitted over her white gown. Kore's personal arms were embroidered on the front — on a field gules, a vulture sable vorant a child — a black vulture on a red field devouring a child. Too gaudy for ordinary wear, but perfect for greeting barbarians at the gate.

Standing still, she let them dress her, knowing she was their hope and protection, the Dark Daughter that women turned to in the face of death. Word went swiftly through a keep full of women; everyone knew who came and went, what plans were made, what omens were told — while constantly recasting their personal horoscopes. Right now all fortunes looked bleak. Already these women were virtual prisoners. As they worked, she touched each in turn, drawing their fear into her dark core. Some were much older than she, others heartbreakingly young; all were scared. If Sea Beggars sacked the keep, any woman who survived would see her life get worse — far worse. To emphasize that point besiegers used women and children hostages in the last attack, driving them forward at spear point as human shields. It had not worked, but it showed what to expect.

Yet their fear came from clinging to life, while she had given herself over to death, putting her in cool command. "Dinner must be served at the usual time," she reminded them, "not a jot later — unless you hear from me. Understand? And no heavy cooked dishes. Cold meats. Smoked ham. Fish and cheeses, served with figs, apples, scones and salted butter. Is there any fresh herring to be had?"

They shook their heads. "The herring fleet never arrived." And was not likely to.

"Salt fish will have to do. And beer. Cold beer from the cistern, in big buckets."

They grinned at that.

"That's good. Be brave, bring beer, and all will be well. Dead or alive." They laughed at that too. No one could serve Death daily without developing a sense of humor. Liveried guards in her vulture crest saluted

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as she descended the spiral stairs and crossed the inner drawbridge leading to the gate. Eros met her at the outer portcullis, with a white satin sheet tied to a herald's gold staff. Heralds were sacrosanct, but Kore saw he still had mail under his ermine and velvet surcoat, and doubtless a folding crossbow up his flowing sleeve. Having no scruples himself, Eros lacked faith in others. She asked, "Did you warn the archer?"

"I told him to cover us. And if anyone fires at the wrong time, I promised to strangle him with his own bowstring."

"I suppose that must do." She waited for the portcullis to rise. This inner gate was a miracle of military engineering, built around an inner drawbridge, with a portcullis at either end, and openings above allowing all manner of noxious substances to be poured over intruders. Narrow arrow slits with round firing ports at their bases covered her from three sides — soldiers had an amusing name for these deadly stone slits — one referring to female anatomy. Though she learned it as a girl, no one now dared use it to her face.

When the portcullis clanged to a stop overhead, Eros stuck his white flag out the gate, waved it energetically, then made an after-you motion. "Lead on, M'Lady."

Even people who hated and despised her thought it must be fine to be Dark Daughter to the Goddess-on-Earth, Demi-Goddess of Death, Lady of Seagate, heiress to castles and keeps. And a witch as well. Perhaps it was, though Kore had nothing to judge it by, since this was the life she was given. Now she must prove her worth — be Death incarnate, or share the fate of any hapless serf girl stoned for having the evil eye. Or for playing with snakes.

She stepped out onto the stone flags of the inner ward, a flat triangle jutting from the base of the keep. Towering clouds topped the peaks to the west, and sunlight shone on the water around her. Eros followed her out, dutifully waving his flag. Seagate stood atop a rock spur ringed by water, separating the Narrows into two channels — called the Gullet and the Windpipe. Stone bridges connected Seagate's inner ward to the adjacent headlands, but the main entrance was the water gate at the base of the rock, now in the hands of Sea Beggars. No ship could now pass the Narrows, nor approach the keep. Nor was there a friendly fleet big enough to break through to Seagate.

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Women and children cowered against the outer parapet, huddled just below the wall walk, staring wide-eyed at her, Death herself walking their way. These were the hostages the Sea Beggars had driven before them. Kore signed for the women to keep down. First task was to somehow get these innocents inside the keep — but a general rush for safety would only provoke a massacre. Sea Beggars crouched just behind the battlements in the outer ward — crossbows cocked, heads hidden, but still hoping the hostages would block up the keep's elaborate gate defenses.

"Not a promising picture," Eros concluded. Kore nodded, seeing the open ward littered with bodies, surrounded by spent arrows and catapult balls. The body closest to her stirred, breathing, but unable to get up. Kore went down on one knee beside a Sea Beggar in a bright blue brigandine jacket studded with nailheads. A melon-sized catapult ball had crushed his leg; he also had a crossbow bolt in his boot and a couple of arrows in his armored jacket — but those hardly counted. She doubted he even felt them.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

The bearded pirate winced. "Like fire, M'Lady."

"This will help." She told Eros, "Get out your horn and cup." Her herald produced a drinking horn, pouring water into the shallow cup that served as a cap. Opening a potion ring, she mixed in sleeping powder, then gave it to the man. He immediately downed the potion — a wound like his produced a powerful thirst. Then he sank back, breathing softly. Sea Beggars did not flinch at being tended by a witch, happily taking whatever you had to offer — and more.

She went from body to body, saying a prayer each time. All the other Sea Beggars were beyond help, save for a beautiful blonde boy with a big javelin clear through him. Hitting too low to kill outright, the iron spear tore through the boy's intestine, severed his spine and spilled buckets of blood — doing everything but killing him. That was left to Kore. Soothing the boy, she told Eros to give him water, then she drew the viper's tongue out of her hair, slipping off the cork. This was her most feared aspect, though it was merely the dark side of healing. Seeing him taste the water, she slid the needle into his neck, saying a prayer and pressing the stopper. She held his head, singing softly until he was dead. Mother-Lover-Destroyer, with him until the end.

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Women and children huddled below the wall walk, watching Death work up close. None of them were wounded. Horrified and frightened for sure, but not physically harmed — so far. Archers atop the keep knew their business, shooting over the heads of the hostages, neatly dropping everything from crossbow bolts to catapult balls onto the Sea Beggars behind them, who now crouched behind makeshift barricades studded with arrows.

She slid the viper's tongue back into her comb, having done what she could for the dead and wounded, turning her attention to the live and whole — a much harder task. Head-sized stones landing on a man's leg made him much more manageable, piteously glad for a woman's touch. Hale and hearty Sea Beggars holding the outer ward were not so easy to please. Motioning for Eros to follow, she strode up to the breach the Sea Beggars had made by throwing a wooden footbridge over the gap between the outer and inner wards. Helmeted heads peeked up to take a look at her. Her white silk gown and scarlet surcoat were picked to draw attention — meant to make her look more like a prize than a target. Saying a short protective spell, she stepped up onto the wall walk, an easy mark for any arrow, Eros's white flag waving behind her.

Sea Beggars in steel helmets and studded jackets crouched at the far end of their short footbridge, which bristled with arrows. Boarding pikes poked across the gap. Rising onto her toes, Kore called out, "Hallo, the outer ward. Who calls at Seagate keep?"

Slowly an unkempt captain in dented half armor rose to greet her. Under less trying circumstances he would have been handsome, with a strong hawklike face, a trim beard, and deep-set eyes — but now he just looked haggard, like he had lost sleep, with a fresh cut over his eye, and an arrow hole in his salt-stained hose. Between them lay five yards of arrow-studded bridge, flung across the gap between the two wards, a forty-foot deep rock trench separating the inner and outer wards. Stepping up onto the footbridge in worn sea boots, the Sea Beggar doffed his steel pot-helm and managed a sweeping bow. "Stefan Ryschov of the *Mermaid*, at your service."

"Lady Kore of Seagate," she replied, neglecting her other titles — right now this was the one that mattered. Last she heard the *Mermaid* was commanded by Le Suisse, but among Sea Beggars ownership is a sometime

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thing. She stepped up onto the bridge, putting them on the same level, asking, "Why have you come here, disturbing our peace?"

"Because we have no choice, M'Lady. We are fleeing for our lives, and you were merely in the way. Believe me, we do not wish to be here, but this is our sole way into the Sound."

Where they were thoroughly unwanted. She tactfully pretended they had a chance of getting in. "Ships enter and leave the Sound every day. You could have anchored here, asking leave to pass in civilized fashion."

Captain Stefan scoffed at the notion. "And be wiped out while you listened to our pleas and sobs, in civilized fashion? No, M'Lady, we have women and children aboard our boats. We had to see them safe before settling down to talk."

Admirable sentiments. It was hard to hate such a reasonable-sounding villain. She made a sign to Eros, signaling him to get ready. "What is this you fear so much."

He smiled ruefully. "Something so terrible it has me knocking on Death's door."

Not just knocking, but darn near breaking it in. She studied the brigand intently, trying to see the man behind the dented half-armor and stained hose. His men were afraid of her, literally cowering at Death's door. Even his Ensign barely poked the mermaid banner over the parapet. But handsome Captain Stefan Ryschov stood atop the breach, a target for the entire keep, boldly answering her back, trying to better see the curves behind her vulture surcoat, treating Death herself like a woman. Whatever this man ran from must be truly frightening. "What could be worse than Death?"

"Black Sails." He said it softly, as though he feared they would hear.

"Black Sails?" She, however, had never heard of them.

He nodded, not liking to say the name again.

She signaled with her hand, saying, "Suppliants at Death's door deserve to be fed." Eros dipped his truce flag twice, and smiling women in flowing white dresses emerged from under the iron portcullis carrying smoked hams and baskets of figs and scones, along with bags of apples, tubs of butter, and big cool buckets of beer. Helmeted heads rose up along the far parapet, revealing smiles on haggard faces — a ragged cheer came from the Sea Beggars.

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Women came bravely forward, holding the food in front of them, stepping around the bodies by the breach. Sea Beggars stood up, gesturing wildly, calling to the women, "Come here, Honey. Is that beer? Bring it, we have a horrible thirst."

Encouraged, the women came right up to the breach, laughing and making a game of passing beer and food across the gap, throwing figs and scones over to the men, sticking hams on spear points, looping bucket ropes over their pikes so the beer would slide down the pike shafts to them. Kore stepped farther out onto the bridge, ignoring the dizzying drop, drawing the apple from her secret pocket, offering it to Captain Stefan. "Here. You too are a guest of Seagate."

He did not take it, staring hard at her, not liking the way his men had dropped their guard to welcome her women. But he knew it was no use ordering them back. She stepped closer, still holding out the apple. "Afraid to eat from the hand of Death?"

"You have used poison on one of my men already." He meant the dying boy.

"He could be helped no other way." She took a bite of the apple, finding it cool and tart. Then she offered it again to him. "Your own case is not nearly so hopeless."

"So you say." He took the apple, turned it in his hand, and bit where she had bit. That was Eros's signal. Shielded by the women joyously handing out food, he hustled the hostages across the inner ward and under the portcullis into the keep. Men at the breach were much too busy swilling beer and calling to the women to think of trying to stop them. Task one was a *fait accompli*, at the cost of turning her besiegers into dinner guests.

To keep Stefan's attention on her, she asked, "Who are these Black Sails?"

He took another bite of the apple, calmly accepting the loss of his hostages; after all, he now had her within easy reach. "They came from the east, from north of the Great Wall, killing and burning, emptying villages to make room for their cattle. Without warning they fell on the coastal cities, sacking Ustengrad and Zransky. Ustengrad resisted and they slaughtered everyone, even the dogs and cats. Zransky opened its gates in abject surrender, but they still killed everyone taller than a wagon wheel, saving only the children to sell as slaves."

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Ustengrad had its temple to her, so did Zransky; she appointed the head priestesses herself, loving competent women committed to care for the sick and dying. Kore said a silent prayer for their souls. "What of Tskova?"

Captain Stefan waved his apple at his men in the outer ward, happily eating and drinking. "We are what is left of Tskova. Those you see here, and their families aboard ship. Our homes are gone, along with our livelihoods. We sailed across to Korland, thinking the broad sea reach would save us — only to find them there ahead of us. Nordgorad and Lulavik were already in ashes, what survivors there were joined us, leaving nowhere to go but here. Or to the Far Isles."

Nordgorad and Lulavik as well. Every seaport north of the Sound gone, swept away before she heard there was even trouble. She had celebrated Solstice in Lulavik less than a fortnight ago. "How is that possible?"

"Hell alone knows, M'Lady." He very much meant it. She saw handsome Captain Stefan could barely comprehend how he came to be standing here, hundreds of leagues from home, a half-eaten apple in his hand, bargaining with a witch at Death's door. "Until now I had seen nothing like them. Black Sails worship only the wind which fills their sails, taking them where they want to go. Nothing stops them, not city walls, nor open sea. Fearing nothing, they give no quarter, falling out of nowhere like a steel typhoon, wiping the sea clean in their wake."

She shook her head, barely believing this could happen without her knowing. She had heard sea tales aplenty of course, enough to know Captain Stefan was a cunning ruthless pirate, running for his life along with his women and children, and willing to throw men and ships against a stone fortress that had stood scores of sieges — if he was not running from these "Black Sails" then it had to be from something equally bad. She asked, "Are they human?" That at least would give her an edge; she was still Demi-Goddess of Death.

"Perhaps," Stefan shrugged armored shoulders. "They do not look like us, having leathery skin and slanted demon eyes. At Zransky they raped the younger women before slitting their throats. Does that make them more or less human?"

She saw his point; but humans had human weaknesses, giving her

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some hope. Her women bid happy farewells to the men across the gap, blowing kisses and tossing the last of the apples, then skirting the bodies and heading for safety. Men clamored for them to stay, calling out endearments, reaching into the gap, begging, "Come finish the beer with us!" — but making no concerted attempt to stop them. Only a shower of arrows could keep her women from reaching the keep, and that was out of the question — no one wanted to turn the party back into a battle.

Now she alone had to be extracted, standing on — and blocking — the makeshift bridge over the rock trench between the two wards. Keeping her gaze fixed on Captain Stefan, holding his attention, she asked, "What do you want?"

He smiled insolently over the apple, flirting with Death for a moment. "To eat, to breathe, to make love to women. Beautiful ones if possible. Nothing that out of the ordinary." Then he nodded over his shoulder. "It is not what I want — it is what the Black Sails want that matters. They will be here, sooner than you think."

"How soon?" Less than an hour ago she did not know these Black Sails existed; now they might top the horizon at any moment.

"We feared they might be here ahead of us, like at Nordgorad and Lulavik."

"And now that you have beat them here?"

"We have no time to waste." Captain Stefan deftly ticked off demands. "After sending our families to safety in the Sound, we can unite to defend the Narrows, doubling your garrison and adding a fleet of warships. Together we might have a chance to hold them off, a tiny one it is true, but a chance."

How like a man. Breaks in her door, strews bodies on the inner ward, and instead of apologizing he wants to move in. Captain Stefan could use a lesson in humility. "Do you not fear to make a deal with Death?"

He shrugged again. "Death we can bargain with, but not the Black Sails."

Pity. But there would be no bargaining, not now anyway. Captain Stefan could keep what he had won, and not a jot more. She told him, "This most important message you have brought must be taken at once to my mother, the Goddess-on-Earth, if you are to find safe haven in the Sound." One very huge "if" — absolutely no one in the Sound wanted Sea

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Beggars settling in — she foresaw that without any spellcraft. "Until I return with her answer, make free with the outer ward, which is yours to use so long as you are here. Water and provisions will be provided from the castle cistern and stores. Your man with the broken leg should live — if you lack a reliable bone-setter, I will provide, for you are my guests and under my protection."

His grin returned, "But that is not near good enough. I need you to open up your keep, and give assurances."

"You have my promise of protection," she reminded him.

"Hardly reassuring," he retorted.

"Alas, it is the best I have — now I must consult with the Goddess-on-Earth. I look forward to seeing you again, for this has been most pleasant." Lifting her skirt, she turned and started back toward the inner ward, mindful of the arrows sticking in the bridge.

Captain Stefan cried, "Stop!"

She turned to him, arching an eyebrow. "What for?"

"I did not give you leave to go." Stefan's men looked up, surprised to find things suddenly amiss.

"Then pray give me leave, for I am going." She stepped down off the bridge and starting walking across the inner ward toward the gate.

Again he shouted after her, "Stop! I must have access to your keep."

She turned, smiling apologetically. "You have been excellent company and provided a most valuable warning — putting me doubly in your debt — but if this warning is to make a difference, I must go at once, for your benefit as much as anyone's." No one could say Death was not polite.

"Wait!" he demanded. "My archers can cut you down before you get halfway to the gate."

"Do what you will," she told him primly, turning her back on the bows. Death left all such decisions up to the living, taking each soul as it came.

"Halt!" he shouted, angry to have given away his hostages for ham and beer. "I vow if you take another step, I shall have them fire."

Thank Hecate she made a small target. She continued walking toward the gate, silent and implacable as her namesake. Let them shoot. Kore lived every moment of her life ready to die — the only way for the

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Demi-Goddess of Death. How could she ask others to let go of their lives gratefully, if she was not always ready to give up her own? Secretly, however, she did not think Captain Stefan would have his men shoot; killing the one person who offered him shelter was not a good bet for a buccaneer. Completely out of character in fact. And it was doubly unlikely his archers would obey — only a bold Sea Beggar would drink and eat at Death's door, then shoot his witch-hostess in the back. Sailors were far too superstitious. If Captain Stefan meant to kill her, he would have to do it himself.

But he did not. When the portcullis rang down behind her, handsome Captain Stefan still stood at the breach, holding his half-eaten apple.

Hawking

LADY KORE WENT hawking to be alone. The pastime's very nature insured privacy. As soon as she put on her fleece-lined hawking jacket over harem pants tucked into soft leather boots, and climbed past the palace dovecotes into the dimly lit mews, she entered a world of limitless freedom and exhilarating solitude, a world denied to everyone but falconers and their birds. And right now she needed solitude, to be alone with her problems, ordering her thoughts in private, before meeting with Mother. In Seagate under siege, everyone's eyes were on her. Women attended her waking needs, then watched over her while she slept. Dwarfs peered up at her. Stone gargoyles glared down. Guards gawked in silent fascination as she passed, knowing their life lay in her hands. In a crisis she was supposed to be as implacable and unfeeling as death itself, and dared not share her private fears with any of them, not even cute cousin Eros.

Moreover, hawking was a woman's pastime, not as practical as needlepoint, nor as dangerous as childbirth, but not safe or frivolous either; a pastime where patient sensitivity counted for more than size and strength, where for once Kore's light weight and small frame were actual advantages. Hawking took infinite care, an even temper, and calm alert daring — all qualities Kore needed to nurture. Big as a barn, and perched on the topmost tower of Seagate keep, the high gabled mews had tall double doors at each end. The mews-boy met her at the trap entrance,

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touching his forelock, asking, "Which bird does Your Highness wish? Will it be Havoc?"

Havoc was her favorite hawk, a huge purebred Barbary roc. "Make it Ripper," Kore decided, "the young griffhawk in training. We can both can use the exercise." Already things were simpler.

Bowing, the boy hastened to obey, leading her to the griffhawk's perch. The smaller birds — merlins, goshawks, gyrfalcons, peregrines and golden eagles — had their roosts high up along the wall, with long ladders leading to them. The larger birds — rocs, griffhawks, and giant condors — had tall perches spaced along the floor, high enough to keep their sweeping tail feathers from touching the coarse clean sand. With a low whistle, Kore caught the griffhawk's attention, talking calmly and gently while the boy used a ladder to saddle the *falcoform* six times his size and weight. As she tightened the breast straps, Kore told the hawk what fun they would have. "This is a day for flying. Just you and me. Free as the air."

Cocking her hooded head, the huge bird-of-prey looked fiercely back at Kore through the eye holes. A full-grown griffhawk stood ten feet at the shoulder, and could spear you with her talons, or take off your head with her great curved beak. Hawking was not a pastime for the timid. Or foolhardy.

Which was why Kore hand-raised her hawks, never trusting a bird she did not know. Most birds in the mews were her nestlings, but only the griffhawks were native to Markovy, coming from beyond the Iron Wood, where they lived off steppe antelope and straying cattle. The giant condors were bred from a single pair, sent to the Goddess-on-Earth by a distant potentate. Rocs came from Far Barbary, where hillmen risked their lives climbing crags to steal their eggs. A single egg was worth a fortune, if the hatchling was female — males were too small for flying, fit only for breeding and bringing down deer. Handfeeding her hawks from the time they hatched, Kore talked to them, and got them accustomed to her touch, taught them simple commands. As they grew older, she trained them to take the hood and empty saddle, and to follow a lure. Weight was added as they matured — until the day when the hawk could carry her. "Come," she told Ripper, "'twill be an adventure."

Climbing onto the hawk, she lay down on the saddle, strapping herself in and taking up the hood reins, telling the boy to untie the leash

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and open the great double doors. Flocks of pigeons from the dovecotes wheeled through the noon sky. The griffhawk followed them with her eye. Kore leaned forward, whispering, "Go."

Spreading wings as long as catapult levers, the griffhawk sprang from her perch. Soaring out the double doors, she swooped low over the inner ward, gathering speed. Lying prone in the saddle, Kore felt the heart-pumping surge of takeoff. Women cooking on rooftops or hanging out wash looked up. Children waved. Walls flashed past, then sea and rocks rose to greet her. "Up, up." She shifted backward in the saddle, saying, "Lift and soar."

Ripper obeyed, catching the updraft off the keep walls, soaring upward. As they rose, Kore pulled harder on the hood reins, banking to the right, to search for the broad standing wave where the prevailing west winds rose up over the eastern headland. Turning through a shallow three-quarter circle, she felt for the updraft, urging the hawk to go higher. Again the griffhawk obeyed. Young and new to the game, the hawk still enjoyed flight as much as Kore. Catching the wave of air breaking over the sea cliffs, they spiraled upward into morning sunlight.

Looking back over her shoulder, she saw Seagate falling away behind her, ringed by scattered rocks and white reefs, its twin bridges reaching out to the east and west headlands. Seagate divided the Narrows into the Gullet, and the narrower Windpipe; these two channels were the only passage between the Sound and the White Sea, an inlet of the Arctic Ocean that separated northern Markovy from the polar ice cap. Two massive underwater chains kept oceangoing ships from using either channel without permission — but the Sea Beggars had slid their galleys, barques, zebecks and row barges over the chains into the shelter of the sound. Only their big seagoing carracks were blocked from entering. *Nymph*, *Tempest*, and the flagship *Mermaid* were moored in the mouth of the Gullet amid a half-dozen captured merchant ships, safe from wind and sea but unable to enter the Sound — hopefully Captain Stefan was swinging in his hammock, taking his ease until she got back.

But whatever devilment the Sea Beggar planned, she prayed it did not hatch until she returned, or there was bound to be yet more mayhem. Being Demi-Goddess of Death was not as soft as some folks imagined; accepting her own death did not make the death of others any easier. Mere

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mortals clung pitifully to life, like that boy in the inner ward, his guts speared and spine cut, his body useless, but still he sobbed at her breast, clutching her gown, wanting to live. And now whole cities full of them had been massacred. Or so the Sea Beggars said. Way too much depended on the doubtful word of a buccaneer and smuggler trying to bully his way into the Sound. For all she knew the Black Sails were just a sea story like sirens and lost Atlantis. Korland and the northern ports might be basking in the long warm days after solstice, enjoying peace and plenty while she was put into a panic by a smooth-talking pirate.

Hoping handsome Captain Stefan was making a complete fool of her, she steered her hawk along the high eastern headland, riding the long wave of air curling over the mountain spine bordering the Sound. When the east shore sank down into rolling foothills, she turned inland toward the Iron Wood, catching the hot updraft off the black barren expanse of metal trees. Spiraling upward in this massive thermal, she took the griffhawk higher than any bird would ever go, until they were alone in the vast sea of air. Here was hawking at its most lonesome, woman and bird surrounded by miles of open sky.

Saying a prayer to the winds, she turned Ripper back toward the cloud-wracked Sound, putting the hawk in a shallow stoop, gathering speed. By the time they broke through the clouds they were winging over water, with Fair Isle just ahead — her mother's home, sanctuary to the Goddess-on-Earth. Lying under the Peace of the Goddess, Fair Isle had no guards, no garrison, and no edged weapons, unless you counted scythes and turnip knives. Tall natural cliffs forced all boats to land at a single small wharf, where people and cargo were lifted up the cliffs in oversized baskets. Otherwise Fair Isle was unapproachable, except by air. She brought her griffhawk down inside the temple precinct, landing in her mother's private garden, telling the startled nymphs to feed and care for her hawk. Death is always informal, arriving when and where she pleases.

Ripper happily preened herself, pleased with her flight. Everyone else did Kore instant homage — not as unnerving as you might imagine — but she much preferred the informality of Seagate, where people wore her livery without dropping to their knees whenever she appeared. Open adoration showed how much these people feared her. Fair Isle lived on what her people grew, and on milk from their flocks — all with very little

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discord. Any crimes or accusations were judged by the Goddess herself, under threat of banishment. Theft was rare, rape unheard of, and there had never been a killing of any sort. No one even ate meat, and the only animals slaughtered were goats fed to her griffhawks. Kore alone was allowed to bring weapons and killing to Fair Isle.

Mother met her in the innermost sanctuary, a square court open to the sky, where they could kiss and hug, and talk in private — though everyone knew the Dark Daughter had come unexpectedly, and everyone feared the worst. Mother wore her silver regalia, the cloth-of-silver gown, crescent moon headdress, and white polar bear cloak of the Goddess-on-Earth. Kore still had on her leather flying jacket, over harem pants and hawking boots, making her feel less like death incarnate, and more like a child, running in all disheveled and dressed for play, telling her Mother a terrible story. And her tale was terrible, sounding worse each time she told it. Eros at least was openly scornful — claiming Sea Beggars would say anything for a chance to loot the Sound — but that was male bravado, unwilling to admit to problems Love could not solve. On peaceful undefended Fair Isle, Captain Stefan's story sounded ten times worse. Mother was properly horrified, saying she had never heard of these Black Sails. "Cathayans speak of 'barbarians' north of the Great Wall, but claim they are of no account."

Kore smiled grimly. "We are all no account barbarians to the Cathayans."

"Exactly," Mother agreed — though she never left Fair Isle, the Goddess-on-Earth had vast knowledge of people and places. "And Tskova has long been a troublesome nest of smugglers and privateers." Neither Sea Beggars nor Cathayans could normally be trusted. "Men will most likely call it a lie...."

"Eros already has," Kore told her.

Mother nodded, "...meant to ease their way into the Sound."

"So Eros said."

"Cousin Eros is a valuable window into the male mind," Mother observed, "never deigning to hide his thoughts, no matter how prurient or self-interested. Yet he remains open to reason." That could hardly be said for the rest of the Sound's floating population of fisher clans, Norse traders, Flemish merchants, monks, sealers and the like — loosely ruled

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by quarrelsome Markovite boyars farther south. Only fear of Kore and awe of the Goddess-on-Earth kept them in check, without making them the least bit trusting. Mother swiftly foresaw their reaction. "First they will deny the danger, thinking only of the Sea Beggars and their threat to the Sound."

Kore agreed. "It would take gem-hard proof to convince them." Boyars and landgrafs were more likely to burn witches than listen to them.

"And if we do convince them, they will want to fight," Mother pointed out. "First the Sea Beggars, then the Black Sails." Keeping Death awfully busy for the foreseeable future. Kore agreed that unreasoning denial followed by blind aggression were the most likely reactions. Even Captain Stefan knew better than that — offering an immediate alliance against the Black Sails — desperate enough to die defending someone else's home. "We can only hope the Sea Beggars are lying," Mother concluded. "If they are, and Seagate holds, then these buccaneers cannot get their big ships into the Sound — keeping the combatants apart."

With Seagate in between; Death did the dirty work, so Fair Isle could stay pure. "As long as there are no Black Sails," Kore pointed out.

The Goddess-on-Earth eyed her intently. "Do you think these Black Sails are real?"

Kore nodded, "Yes, I do." She wished it were not so, but she did.

"Why so?" Mother asked.

As Demi-Goddess of Death, Kore had a worst-case mentality that came from accepting the most terrible outcomes — but that was not why she believed the Black Sails were real. "I could see it in Captain Stefan's eyes. He was not telling a sea tale; he was frightened. And he is a man not easily scared."

Mother arched an eyebrow. "And is he handsome as well?"

"Moderately so." Kore had no designs on Captain Stefan, no matter how handsome. Death must be a maiden, or a crone, never a mother. She could not both raise a child and be always ready to die. Someday she would give up her post to have children, but not now, not today, not with Sea Beggars in the Sound and Black Sails bearing down on her. "But good looks could not hide his fear. The Black Sails are real and dangerous. They may not be as bad as Captain Stefan says, but they are bad."

"We must have more than a Sea Beggar's word on this," Mother

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pointed out. "And we must know more than he has told you. Who are these Black Sails? Where did they come here from? And why?"

It was Kore's task to find out, since Death got all the difficult cases. To rest her griffhawk, she flew one of Mother's rocs back to Seagate. Bigger than griffhawks, rocs could be ridden sitting up, and the Goddess had a half dozen pairs in her mews, though only her daughters and granddaughters flew them. The giant birds lived by hunting deer and antelope on the mainland, observing Fair Isle's ban on killing for food.

Skimming low over the shore, Kore caught the hot updraft off the Iron Wood, spiraling slowly upward, giving herself time to plan. She had to go to Korland herself to see if Nordgorad and Lulavik were really in ashes, and search for some sign of the mysterious Black Sails. But first she must keep the Sea Beggars from making mischief behind her back — maybe even forge a truce with Captain Stefan. It was in the Sea Beggars' self-interest to confirm their story and scout the movements of the Black Sails, assuming they existed. Flocks of snow geese flew alongside her in big honking V formations, headed for summer feeding grounds on Korland.

Riding the standing wave along the eastern ridgeline, she saw the black mass of Seagate ahead, silhouetted against the tarnished gold glow of a high latitude summer sunset. It had been a long, long day — that began before dawn, with Sea Beggars bashing in the water gate and seizing the outer ward — and she could use whatever rest the short night had to offer.

No such luck. As she neared the keep she made out tiny black specks in the sunset glow, hanging about the Gullet Tower like wasps in amber. War kites. Instantly awake, she leaned forward, putting her roc into a stoop, flashing over the Windpipe to take a closer look. Damn, she could not leave for even half a day without some new disaster. Circling above the keep, she saw that the Sea Beggars had brought row barges towing war kites into the Gullet, anchoring just upwind of the Gullet Tower, which sat at the west end of the inner ward, serving as a gatehouse for the bridge spanning the Gullet. But that was not why the Sea Beggars had attacked the Gullet Tower; they picked it because the tower housed the mechanism working the chain guarding the Gullet. By taking the tower the Sea Beggars could bypass Seagate, bringing their big ships and merchant prizes straight into the Sound.

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Landing her roc on a wall walk out of range of the kites, she told the startled sentries to fetch Eros, "And have him bring my scythe!"

Sentries dashed off to do her bidding, making her glad to be back where she was obeyed instead of worshipped. What should she make of this second Sea Beggar attack? Was it proof Captain Stefan had lied, merely seeking to loot the Sound? Or was he just desperate to escape the Black Sails? Either way, he must be turned back as quickly and cheaply as possible — just to prove that force would not work. Then they could negotiate. She wished she had called for Havoc as well as her scythe, but there was no time to change rocs in mid-battle.

Eros brought the scythe, a big beautiful one with a black handle and a long shining steel-alloy blade shaped like a sliver-thin moon. He had his own Love God's bow as well — a gold-chased double crossbow with a telescopic sight. Handing over the scythe, he made his report, saying Sea Beggars had indeed anchored kite barges in the Sound. "They cleared the top of the Gullet Tower with arrow fire, then landed men from one of the box kites, who let down a line to more men waiting on the seaward side of the tower. Luckily that is all they have taken, but they are trying to fight their way down to the chain mechanism. So as long as their kites fire down on us, we cannot mount a counterattack, or direct adequate fire on the tower."

"How many kites?" she demanded, determined to do something before they lost the light.

"Two big box kites, and a dozen smaller ones." Eros pulled a clip of six hypodermic quarrels from his belt, sliding it into the bow; springs in the clip fed the quarrels two at a time into the double bow, which was already bent.

Kore grinned at him. "Make love not war?"

"Naturally." Eros smiled back, closing the bolt, locking in the quarrels.

She took off, again wishing she were aboard Havoc, urging her borrowed roc upward into the fading light, her scythe shining blood red in the sunset. Heading for the nearest kite line, she swooped down, picking a spot where she could not be fired on from the barges or by the archer lashed to the huge kite at the end of the line. As her hawk plunged past, she caught the silk line with her scythe, slicing it neatly.

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Half the line dropped down into the Gullet and the other half shot off as the man-kite was borne away downwind. She said a prayer for his soul. If he came down in water the fellow was a Sea Beggar and presumably could swim — if not, Death had small sympathy for someone who made his living as a sniper.

She cut a second line and a third, one by one getting rid of the kites along the west wall of the keep. Archers strapped to the kites and firing powerful recurve bows kept Eros and his men from advancing along the wall walk toward the Gullet Tower. As she severed a fourth line a spear flashed past her; looking up she saw a big four-story box kite with a basket beneath it. A windlass on a barge below was winding the box kite down, and two men in the basket were throwing heavy javelins at her, trying to spear her borrowed bird.

Banking hard to avoid the next spear, she made a pass at the cable connecting the box kite to the barge, slashing as she flew by. But the box kite cable was too thick, and she nearly lost her scythe and her seat. Saved by her saddle strap, she put her roc in a stoop to gain speed, then flew back up along the wall, with black night wind rushing through her hair. Ahead she saw more silk kite lines to cut, standing taut in the last of the light. Eros and his men were on the wall walk, shouting and waving to her. She waved back with her scythe. Eros had his double bow out, aiming it her way — which she could not understand. What was he trying to say?

As she pondered her cousin's strange behavior, a heavy weight hit her from behind, knocking the wind out of her. Arms closed around her chest, and she lost her scythe, along with her grip on the reins. Seeing a flash of steel, she expected to feel a stab in the back, or a blade through her throat. Instead the knife cut her saddle strap, and her roc fell away.

Feet kicking in empty air, she was no longer flying, but being held aloft by whoever had her — if he let go, she would fall to the rocks below. Twisting about, she grabbed one of the kite straps, though the man showed no sign of releasing her. Looking up, she saw the huge rounded outline of the kite bowed by the evening wind, and beneath it a familiar face, grinning back at her.

"Lady Death, we meet again." It was Stefan Ryschov, Captain of the *Mermaid*, lashed to a man-carrying kite and looking almighty pleased with himself. And rightly so. He had dipped his kite down as she sped past,

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catching her from behind — a neat bit of maneuvering, showing Captain Stefan and the men on his barge were masters at kite flying — putting her at his mercy.

Almost. Turning in his arms, she braced a boot against the kite and grabbed his shoulder with her left hand, her killing hand. Her venom ring was inches from his neck. "Quit struggling," he told her, "or I will have to drop you."

She could feel herself dropping already, rapidly being reeled down by the crew of the row barge — veteran fishermen hauling in their catch. Her heart sank further with each turn of the winch. Men waited on the deck below to seize her; in minutes she would be in their hands, and killing a few of them first was not going to make her chances any better.

Suddenly a golden crossbow quarrel hit her captor in the shoulder, seeming to sprout magically out of his bicep, inches from her face. His arms tightened convulsively, pulling her closer to him. She recognized one of Eros's arrows, with its needle thin point and hypodermic body, designed to deliver an injection on impact. For a dizzying moment she hung there, locked in Captain Stefan's arms, holding tight to the kite strap, staring at the little golden arrow.

She felt a stab in her buttock, followed by the burning surge of an injection. Eros's second shot had hit her. She opened her mouth in protest, but before she could get a word out Captain Stefan leaned down, covering her mouth with his. He was kissing her, and in a moment, she was kissing him back.

Black Sails

DAMN EROS and his arrows. She was in love, head-over-heels, crazy in love with the Sea Beggar busy carrying her off. Clinging to his whip-hard waist, she felt his hand on her back, pressing her harder to him, breast to chest, hip to groin. And all the time they kept kissing, exploring each other's mouths in midair. Exciting and intimate, thrilling even, with nothing beneath her but black air. Kore had never been in love before — not like this at least. Death was no blushing virgin, nor was she as experienced as people supposed, especially if you did not count kissing

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cousins. Few men pounded on Death's door demanding a date, and most that did had mixed motives, like handsome Captain Stefan here.

Totally new to mating on the wing, she found her new soulmate surprisingly adept at it, feeling him reach around and roll down her pants, keeping their lips and bodies locked together. She felt the stab of pain as her hypodermic dart came out, falling down into the dark Gullet. His was still in his arm. Letting go of his lips, and the kite strap, she pulled the golden shaft from his bicep, dropping it after its mate. Then she kissed the wound it left, licking up blood and aphrodisiac.

Deft as Captain Stefan might be aboard a kite, he could not get her harem pants down fast enough. They were still tangled around her knees when the barge deck slammed into her flying boots, nearly spilling her onto the wet wood. Fortunately sturdy Captain Stefan helped break her fall, as did the overloaded kite, snapping silk butterfly wings in a crash of splintering bamboo. Keeping her feet, she stepped sideways out of the wreckage, half-naked and totally disheveled, but shamelessly happy. Being Demi-Goddess of Death meant never having to blush. Her advent stunned the Sea Beggars around her. Rowers sat open-mouthed at their oars, and even the men who had wound her down stood frozen at the windlass, waiting to see what happened next.

Shedding the remains of his war kite, Captain Stefan shouted to the amazed men at the windlass, "Up anchor!" Then he called to the startled rowers, "Back oars. Get us out of the Gullet while we still have the light." Stefan turned to a tall picturesque Sea Beggar wearing hip boots, silk pants, a steel breastplate and a green-turbaned helmet, telling the pirate, "Signal withdrawal. Two yellow rockets. Take your launch and see to the retreat. Keep the other kites aloft until our men clear the tower, then meet me back aboard the *Mermaid*."

Bowing, the armored Sea Beggar disappeared over the side into a waiting launch. Captain Stefan turned back to her, bowing courteously. "Lady Death, welcome aboard the *Salamander*. If you will follow me."

"Kore," she told him, pulling up her pants. Since they were going to be intimate, best to start out on a first name basis. "You can call me Kore."

Captain Stefan's smile widened, looking very much like a man in love, who was about to get what he wanted. "Will M'Lady Kore come with me?"

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"Of course." She nodded amiably. He would get his way, because Kore was in love as well, horribly so. There was no fighting Eros's arrows. Stefan's approving smile sent sharp pangs of happiness shooting through her. Heavens, he was good-looking and amazingly bold, even for a pirate. And he was hers, every handsome ruthless inch of him, hers to have and to hold, to love and nurture, for as long as Eros's spell lasted. Warm feelings welled up within her. Death almost never got to be tender and maternal, unless you counted moments like this morning with that dying boy at the breach.

He led her to a red silk tent at the rear of the row barge, lit from within by soft yellow lantern light. This crimson love nest was already occupied by three women and a handful of startled children, whom Captain Stefan immediately ordered to leave. Surprised but obedient, the women gathered up children and possessions, then left, taking the lantern with them, knowing she and Stefan would not be needing the light. Pushing children's dolls and women's things off the dark bed onto the deck, she realized this must be the barge master's tent, and his family was being kicked out to make room for her. Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered except feeling Stefan's tense lean flesh against hers, forgetting all their fears and differences, forgetting everything but their shared desire. Stefan was vastly delighted to discover her thigh knife, "Must Lady Death drag weapons into bed?"

"Who dragged whom here?" She had three more ways to kill him hidden about her naked body, but was way too busy to disarm completely — any man who bedded Lady Death did it at his own risk.

When desire was spent, she lay listening to his breathing, becoming slowly aware of the world beyond their bodies. Wet silk sheets smelled of sweat and sex. Waves lapped against the barge's black hull, gently rocking the bed. From outside she could hear the splash of oars, propelling them through the night. Men were moving on deck, talking in low tones, and a child cried fitfully, no doubt wanting her bed back. "Are you all right?" a voice asked. It was Stefan, awake and up on one elbow, warm and comforting in the darkness.

"Absolutely wonderful," she murmured, slipping closer to his big hard body. How had she managed so long without love? It hardly seemed possible that she had survived without someone to care for her, to share her problems with.

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"Me too," Stefan admitted. "Who would have thought that bedding down with Death could be so marvelous?"

Who indeed? Not even the demi-goddess herself, who was completely surprised to be so transported. She ran her finger over the naked curve of his chest, saying, "Blame it on cousin Eros."

"Cousin Eros?" Stefan sounded surprised.

"It was his dart I pulled from your arm."

"What does that have to do with it? I have been in love with you from the first moment you stepped up onto the breach and asked for a parley, facing our arrows without flinching."

"Is that why you did not have me shot?" She remembered her long walk to the keep portcullis, expecting that at any moment she might get a shaft in her back.

"Of course." He pulled her tight against him, letting her feel his renewed excitement. "I wanted you here with me, like this, not all punctured with arrows. Together we can work miracles."

"Let us hope so." She laughed. Love had given her new heart, but had not solved all her problems.

"You shall see." Stefan brimmed with male self-confidence. "With my fleet and your fortress, we have half a chance against the Black Sails."

She laughed lightly at that suggestion. Love had not made her take total leave of her senses. "I cannot just let you into Seagate." Into her body yes, but not her fortress keep.

"Why not?" Stefan sounded wounded. "How can you not believe me? I swear I would not lie to you, in fact I have never lied to you; there has barely been time, since we only met this morning."

"But I do believe you," she assured him. "Alas, every bit of evidence points to your telling the absolute truth." Even the borrowed bed she lay on, with its rag dolls and baby baskets, was added proof — Sea Beggars would not bring their women and children into a night action unless they were desperately short of deck space, and frantic to break into the Sound.

"Since you believe me, we should start at once," he suggested. "Your keep and my fleet gives us a fighting chance. What more can a man ask for?"

"Women want a good deal more," she informed him, fearing they were headed for their first fight. "Men think that dying sword in hand

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somehow makes a difference — it does not. Take Death's word for that. The dead are dead, believe me, I know. And it matters not if you go down boldly giving blow for blow, or blubbering for mercy on your knees."

Stefan sounded taken aback, asking, "What does matter?"

"Life," she told him, sliding her bare body against his, knowing how best to avoid a fight, "living better and happier, while putting off dying as long as you can."

"Strange thing for Death to say," Stefan observed, stirring with pleasure.

"I am a strange sort of demi-goddess, one who must see these Black Sails for herself."

"Whatever for?"

"Because I must," she insisted, not used to giving anyone reasons, least of all some Sea Beggar in a borrowed bed.

Stefan groaned. "Death, I see, is going to make a difficult mistress."

"Absolutely." She kissed him, thinking the sooner Captain Stefan got used to that the better.

Oars ceased splashing, and someone barked orders, followed by a hail from across the water, then a bump and a thump as the row barge came to rest against some bigger object. Bare feet beat on the deck boards. Stefan sat up, announcing, "This will be my flagship, the *Mermaid*."

Helping Kore out of bed and back into her clothes, he led her out on deck. The *Salamander* was flush up against a high-sided carrack, a big black mass blotting out the stars, lit by torches on the quarter-deck and fire pots hanging from the forward yard ends. Stefan answered another hail from above, and torches moved to the main deck, illuminating the ladder. Climbing toward the light above, she could tell this was Stefan's ship, infused with his spirit, alert but informal, ready for anything, yet not afraid to look relaxed. He led her past the astonished deck watch, past sleeping families camped on the main deck, to his great cabin on the quarter-deck with its sweeping glassed-in stern galley, glittering oil lamps, and big canopied bed. Gilt and glass threw back the light, making the cabin seem to sparkle. Stefan spread his arms, asking, "What do you think?"

She surveyed his opulent quarters, thinking of the families huddled in the hold. "Some Sea Beggars sleep better than others?"

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"Of course." Stefan pulled back the bed curtains to show off his broad feather bed. "What would be the use of being a Sea Beggar if there were no chance of improvement?"

Waking next morning alone in Stefan's big canopy bed, she heard loud calls from the half deck above. Pushing back the fur coverlet, Kore spread the curtains and stared out the wide stern windows, seeing nothing but wave tops stretching toward the watery horizon. Then a broad gray shadow swept past the windows.

Instantly she was out of bed, wrapped in silk sheets and stepping out onto the stern galley. Wet sea air greeted her, cool and salty. Stefan's mermaid flag snapped in the breeze above her, flying from the stern post. Seeing the big shadow wheel about, swinging back by the ship, she gave a falconer's cry. Havoc answered with a cry of her own, dropping low to skim over the wavetops astern of the ship. Her favorite roc had come looking for her, wearing a flying saddle, complete with a bow and quiver. Cousin Eros's work.

Captain Stefan burst into his cabin, not looking the least surprised to find her standing in the open stern galley, wearing one of his bed sheets, talking with a huge roc. "So you know this bird?"

"Certainly." She called for Havoc to come to her. Shouts erupted from the half deck above as a huge roc came down to rest on the long stern boom that supported the bonaventure stays, perched two stories above the water and peering into the stern galley. Havoc had come looking for her mistress, and was living up to her name.

Stefan admired the giant falconiform. Hawking had an aura of the supernatural, and was as suspect as witch's flight, but he acted intrigued. "Is that the bird I plucked you from?"

"No, that was a borrowed roc. Had it been on Havoc, you would never have gotten hold of me."

Stefan laughed, though it was only the truth. Havoc was a wonder of nature, who would never have let some kite-flyer swoop down on her. Just having Havoc here restored the balance between her and Stefan. Eros's arrows kept them from harming each other — but did not stop him from holding her captive. In fact he had excellent reasons to want her with him. Yet with Havoc here, Kore could leave anytime. She asked Stefan, "Will you come with us?"

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He looked from the roc to her. "With you? Where?"

"North to Korland," she reminded him, "to hunt the Black Sails."

Stefan rolled his eyes. "They will find us soon enough. Are you so in love with death that you must hurry it along?"

"No, I am not the least in love with death," she replied primly. "I am Death. You are who I am in love with."

"Which makes me the one in love with death." Stefan shook his head in dismay. "But I suppose I have known that all along."

"Why else would you have come pounding on my door?" She kissed him, to show that having death for a mistress was not all danger and heartache.

Stefan could not bear to see her head north alone, nor could they go on the *Mermaid* with her hold full of refugees, so he transferred his flag to a low sleek zebeck, the *Sparrow*, with lateen sails and seats for twenty oarsmen. Favored by smugglers and corsairs, the zebeck had no half deck, and no great cabin and stern galley, just a lean-to tent on the quarter-deck for the captain and his demi-goddess. Havoc rode on the grating deck, a rakish stern extension of the quarter-deck. Hugging the coast, they headed north, aiming for the Korland Strait. Kore meant to take a look in at Lulavik, at the southern end of the strait, where she had celebrated Solstice only a fortnight ago — hoping against hope to find this was all a hoax.

Four days north of the Narrows, she saw her first sign of the Black Sails. Sailors called from the masthead, pointing out a black speck low down to windward. Stefan put the tiller about to run straight downwind toward the tiny speck, while she took Havoc aloft to investigate. Eros had stocked the roc's saddlebag with fresh potions, and the arrows were drugged; tied to them was a note:

Alas, these are not true love's arrows, and will only put you to sleep
— but mayhap you and your new bedmate will be needing some rest.
Love

Shredding the note, she dropped the pieces into the White Sea, then turned Havoc toward the speck downwind. As she approached the dot grew slowly in size, becoming a huge gas-inflated black parasail, floating

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along several hundred feet above the wave tops. Hanging from the gas-filled sail was a black boat-shaped hull, with a small cabin in the stern. Oddest of all, the boat hull had big iron-shod wagon wheels, looking utterly useless so high in the sky over water. Keeping clear of arrow range, she flew Havoc completely around the flying-boat, trying to see who was aboard.

Apparently no one. Close up, the dangling boat hull looked abandoned, having the distinctive smell of death about it. Flocks of white-black arctic terns flew by, headed for summer feeding grounds. Kore coaxed her nervous roc into making a landing on the foredeck, but the bird's weight made the flying-boat dip, losing altitude alarmingly. Ocean rushed up to greet her.

Seeing ballast bags lining the rail she slit several open with her thigh knife, and sand tumbled into the sea, bringing their fall to a halt. Happy not to be crashing into the wave tops, she surveyed the flying-boat's bamboo deck, finding it virtually empty, just some stray rope ends, the ballast bags, and a dozen arrow quivers lashed to the rails. She sniffed the air, finding the death smell came from the small cabin. Inside was the crew, three of them lying on their mats wrapped in blankets, still wearing gray tunics faced with fur and blue cavalry pants. But for the smell they might have been sleeping.

Here was where Lady Death earned her name. Kneeling on the bamboo, she said a short prayer for their souls, then stripped their bodies bare, going over every inch of skin, searching for a cause of death. They were short wry men with weather-beaten oriental faces, who had all died within a day of each other, several days ago. None of them had bodily wounds, aside from old scars long healed; one had broken his leg as a boy, and the other two had old arrow wounds. None showed clear signs of poisoning. All were alarmingly thin, but not starved, and they all had tiny red blisters on their bodies, mostly on the hands, face, back, and forearms. Two were badly pocked, but the other had hardly any blisters at all. Seeing he was wearing a ring, she pulled it off and found a solid red band of pustules. Weird but not unheard of. Examining the ring, she noted it had Cathayan characters, then slipped it back on the man's finger. He had been the first to die, and the ring had probably killed him — but it was not up to Death to judge, the ring might have been important to him.

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Aside from clothes, money, and weapons, they had scant personal effects, a wind shrine, simple jewelry, paper lanterns, leather water bottles, fishing line and hooks, needles and thread, rice, millet, sesame oil, sulfur matches, a cooking pot and several cups, one carved from a human skull. And not a scrap of writing. No orders, no letters from home, no favorite poems or recipes. No prayer strips or religious texts. Not even someone's initials carved on a sword or cup. All signs that the Black Sails were illiterate. There was a messenger pigeon cote on the stern, but it was empty.

Having searched the entire boat, she collected all the burnables, including underclothes, chopsticks and some Cathayan paper money; piling them against the cabin wall, she doused the whole mess with cooking oil, lit a paper lantern and tossed it on top, starting a brisk fire. Going back on deck, she released the sand ballast, sending the flying-boat soaring upward. She made sure she was taking nothing from the burning ship, as she climbed back onto Havoc and took off. While she glided back down toward the *Sparrow*, she watched the flying-boat drift off downwind, dwindling as it got higher. When the flames reached the inflated sail, the gas inside exploded, leaving a black blotch in the sky while the burning hull plummeted toward the sea trailing a plume of smoke.

Alone with Stefan in the yellow-striped quarter-deck tent, she told him about the flying-boat, asking if it matched the ones used by the Black Sails. Stefan said it did. "The big black sail is filled with a light gas that keeps the boats afloat. By adjusting the trim of the boat and the pitch of the sails they glide great distances downwind. Tethered to a fixed line they can rain death on any fortress or cities. Black Sails are implacable, having no writing nor philosophy, worshipping only the wind in their sails. Cathay feared they would cross the Great Wall. Now they have come our way instead."

It sounded ghastly, even to Death. "What are the wheels for?"

"When the winds are wrong, or there is no flying to be done, the sails are deflated and the hulls are hauled along behind the Black Sail's yurts."

"There is worse," she admitted. "These Black Sails died the Red Death."

"Yikes." He stepped back, taking his hands from her. "Great Goddess in Hell, the Red Death! Do you mean smallpox?"

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She acknowledged his compliment, the Goddess Hell being one of her ancient names, hardly used nowadays except in oaths. "Sometimes it is tough to tell the poxes apart, but the deadlier ones are my specialty, and there is scant doubt."

"And I thought Black Sails were the worst we would find." Stefan did a worried turn around the tent, never having wanted to come north in the first place. "Let the men hear this and it will be mutiny."

"Do not worry, I am immune and not a carrier." She showed him the vaccination scar on her arm. "And you cannot get Red Death from a roc."

"My men are not likely to believe you," he pointed out.

When faced with smallpox, even the word of Death herself was not good enough. "So we must be silent," she told him. "But there can be no landfall now. Havoc and I will have to do the scouting."

Standing out to sea, Stefan made for the Korland Strait by dead reckoning, hiding behind the curve of the Earth. When they got close enough, Kore took Havoc aloft for her look in at Lulavik; as feared, she found the little port city at the southern tip of Korland destroyed. Turning north she followed the east coast of Korland, the great island separating the White Sea from the Arctic Ocean. Fishing villages and sealing camps had vanished, replaced by nomad yurts and cattle brought over from the mainland. Farther up the strait she spotted a big ship sheltering in a Korland cove. Dipping down to investigate, she found a prosperous broad-beamed merchant ship anchored placidly amid the plague and devastation. Strange behavior, which she promptly reported to Stefan on the *Sparrow*'s quarter-deck.

"Damned odd," was Stefan's response. "Why a merchant ship, when there is no one to do business with but the Black Sails and the Red Death?"

It did sound daft. Stefan suggested it was some corsair's prize, fancifully hoping a fellow pirate had gotten lucky. She pointed out there were no other ships around to have captured her. "And what pirate would leave a valuable prize where the Black Sails could fall on it?"

"Not a wise one," Stefan admitted, asking her to describe the ship.

"It looked Cathayan," she decided, "broad-beamed, blunt-bowed, with steep tumble home to the sides, and at least five masts. Strangest of all, there was a tiny cabin atop the main mast, not a crow's nest, but a little

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bamboo house with a basket hoist to supply it. Very curious. I must have a closer look, when the crew is asleep."

"Is that wise?" Stefan wondered, with worry in his voice. Worry for her, which was terribly touching. She was not accustomed to people fearing for her — just being afraid of her.

"Maybe not wise," she admitted, "but necessary. So far this ship is the only thing that does not fit, making it worth a closer look. When facing disaster, look for anything that points in a different direction."

"If you say so." Stefan deferred to her superior knowledge of death and disaster.

She flew over Korland to come down on the cove from the north, seeing the sun set on nomad yurts and herds. Black Sails had crossed in force, bringing not just their flying-boats, but their flocks and families as well — a whole nomad horde out of nowhere was now jammed onto the subarctic island, living heaven knew how. They could not stay here long without starving, and they had crossed the Korland Strait, so water would not stop them; they could come swarming down onto the Sound as soon as a north wind blew. Thankfully winds had been steady from the east, which would blow them to the Far Isles, or even Finland. But that could hardly last. When the sun set she turned south, feeling her way down the dark coast, guided by the white line of breakers and the sound of the surf. Stefan had described the approach in detail, being intimate with every nook and cove in the South Korland coast. Too bad he could not be here.

Finally she saw a light ahead, dim and flickering, but it did not go out. She flew toward it, until Havoc suddenly had to swerve to keep from hitting it. Looming out of the night was the ship, and the light was a paper lantern in the little bamboo house atop the masthead. Landing Havoc on the mainyard, she sat silently in the roc's flying saddle, looking through the window of the little bamboo house, seeing a single silk-lined room where a black-haired young woman dressed in white sat reading from a scroll. Strange, but perhaps to be expected. Death could not help but see the dark side.

Dismounting, she made her way along the mainyard to the window, seeing nothing of the boat below but lights on the bow and stern. Making sure the young reader was alone, she slipped inside, shocking the occupant senseless. Death does not come calling every night, not silently through

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a window several stories high, carrying a hypodermic bow. Before the startled young woman could cry out, Kore nocked an arrow. "Be silent, I only want to talk and look. Do you know who I am?"

Nodding, the woman sat rigid, holding her scroll in her lap, hands still, not knowing it was only a sleep arrow. Long black hair hung all the way to her hips, and her dark eyes were wide and staring.

"Then you know your life is at stake. Whose ship is this?"

"The Karakhan's." By that the woman meant the ruler of Black Cathay, the land of tea and spices that lay beyond the Great Wall. Which put this ship far from home, having come by way of Korea and the Arctic Sea. "We are carrying the Karakhan's ambassador to Korland."

"And what are you called?" Kore asked.

Staring down at her lap, the woman answered softly in a southern-sounding accent, "Autumn Rose."

"Always?" Kore asked. "Did you have a different name as a child?"

"I was called Ah Toy."

"Cantonese?" That explained the southern accent. "Do you belong to the Karakhan as well?"

Autumn Rose nodded yes to both. Too thin and withdrawn to be a courtesan, she seemed of scholarly bent, sitting with an open roll of poetry in her lap. Kore recognized T'ang dynasty script; Li Po, an excellent choice, amusing and insightful, perfect for passing the time. More scrolls poked from neat little pigeonholes. Why would the Karakhan send this female scholar on an Arctic expedition? "What are you doing so far from Cathay?"

Autumn Rose smilied slightly, saying, "I am a gift for the Black Sail Khan, who is in Korland."

Why not jade earrings? Or a silver pagoda tea set? Both would be more useful than this frail poet. She told Autumn Rose to stand, and when the woman did, she ordered her to strip, "I must see what the Black Sail Khan is getting."

Pursing her lips, Autumn Rose objected, the night was cold, and none of this is necessary....

Kore nodded at the invisible boat below. "And no one is going to shinny up the main mast in the middle of the night to save you from Death's arrows." This woman was kept high on the masthead for a reason.

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"Obey and I promise to leave you alive. Give me trouble, and I will be inspecting your body."

Without further protest Autumn Rose stepped out of her white robe, then shed her undergarments, standing naked, hands at her side. Taking the paper lantern, Kore went over the woman, telling her when to lift her arms and spread her legs, looking for pock marks, or scabs, or the little white scars left when the scabs fell off. She found none of them, just smooth skin, pale from seldom seeing the sun. Finishing with the woman's face, she asked, "Have you ever had the pox?"

"No, never." Autumn Rose shook her head decisively.

"But it was in your village."

"When I was a girl," the woman admitted. "And again when I was grown."

"But the second time it mainly took children."

"How did you know?" Autumn Rose asked.

"I know the disease." And she had seen enough. "When will you be presented to the Black Sail Khan?"

"When the Khan is ready to have me. His highness is hunting, and I am but his humble gift, to be taken at his majesty's leisure."

Humble and more. She slipped back out the window, leaving Autumn Rose to dress alone, making her way to Havoc's perch on the mainyard, telling her roc to return to the *Sparrow*. There she told Stefan, "I must speak with the Khan of the Black Sails."

"There are better ways to commit suicide," Stefan suggested. "Just as sure and not near so painful."

"Perhaps, but this is the one I have chosen."

"How can you even find the Khan? Korland is big, and the nomad camps are bound to be scattered around the island to get the best grazing."

"I hear he is hunting. Where is there game to be found in Korland?"

Stefan snorted, "At this time of year? Only on the north of the island, away from the ports."

"Then there is where we must head for." North Korland was a great rolling sweep of grass and tundra, sprinkled with wildflowers and virtually treeless, aside from dwarf willows that lived as ground plants. Taking advantage of a south wind, Stefan steered north through the straits,

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hugging the Korland coast, using his smuggler training to see without being seen. The Khan's great hunt made no attempt to hide; all of North Korland was being scoured by a huge line of horse archers stretching across the island, backed by flying-boats tethered to trains of wagons. Every beast and bird was being driven toward the northernmost tip of Korland using fireworks, blunted arrows and padded lances. Herds of elk and reindeer, ground squirrels, geese, swans, lynx, lemmings, wolves, and arctic foxes, were all jammed into a broad peninsula, pinned in on three sides by the sea, and blocked on the landward side by thickening lines of cavalry. Trapped animals ran back and forth between the horsemen and the shore, unable to escape or find shelter. Frantic wolves and foxes ignored their normal prey, too frightened to hunt. So far none had been harmed, since the honor of the first kill always went to the Khan.

"Here is your chance," Stefan told her, standing safely out to sea. "I have seen these nomad hunts. Tonight they will light a line of fires to keep the animals from escaping, then at dawn the Khan will go in alone to make the first kills. Until then not a weapon will be fired, not even at your roc. It is *lèse majesté* to kill before the Khan — even to save his life."

Kore nodded. "Any Khan that cannot cope with trapped beasts, or a woman on a bird, hardly deserves the title."

"Exactly." Stefan nodded. "And believe me, Black Sails take such things seriously."

Over-seriously one might say; having destroyed or driven off Korland's human population, they were now going after the animals, right down to the ground quirrels and grass voles. At dawn Kore had Havoc aloft, riding the wave of air where the sea breeze rolled over a headland, waiting for the Khan to enter the killing ground. Reindeer huddled on the headland, along with a lone elk, eyed by a polar bear on the beach still hoping to turn calamity into a free meal. When the line of armored cavalry parted, the Black Sail Khan strode bow-in-hand straight for the beach and the polar bear, ignoring startled arctic hares and snow geese.

Kore brought Havoc down on a bare stretch of beach, right between the two most dangerous northern predators, feeling extra small and happy to be atop a roc. Seeing her alight, the man nocked an arrow and bent his bow, taking a defensive stance, while the polar bear dived into the Korland strait, striking out for the mainland. No free meals today. She did not

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bother with sleep arrows, since the last thing she wanted was a fight, calling out in Cathayan, "Do you know who I am?"

His highness nodded tersely, looking very much like the men in the flying-boat, only better fed, with fat on his body and sleek oiled hair. He wore fur-lined boots, lacquered armor, and a grim smile, and though he was only average height, that might be tall for a Tartar. "You are Lady Death who dwells by the Western Sea. We know no human gods, worshipping only the winds."

"But you do know Death. It was the Red Death that brought you here to Korland."

"Yes," he admitted, relaxing the pull on his heavy recurve bow. "The Red Death's reach proved longer than we supposed, so now we have put the sea between us and the pox."

"It will do you no good," she warned.

"We shall see," replied the Khan blandly.

"You shall die," she assured him. "Believe in me or not, but you will not escape this pox, because it is carried by people."

His majesty nodded. "Before any clan or family comes over to Korland they must spend a month apart on the mainland, proving they are pox free."

"Nevertheless you will die." With some people it paid to be relentless.

Arching an eyebrow, the Khan asked, "Then there is nothing we can do?"

"Put yourself in Death's hands," she suggested, getting an outright laugh from the Khan, dry and mirthless. Ignoring his levity, she insisted, "I am your only hope. People call me Kore, and Korland is my country. You have come to me, and I am the only one who can save you from the Red Death." She had flown all this way for a reason; apparently this was it.

"How?" The Khan of the Black Sails looked skeptical.

"Certainly not for free." No one believed in a cure that cost nothing.

Keeping his bow nocked, the Khan asked warily, "What do you want to free us from the Red Death?"

"If I free you from the pox, you must promise to abandon all of Korland." She swung her arm to indicate the surrounding shore, where frightened lemmings scurried about the rocks, nerving themselves for the

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suicide leap into the sea. Big ground-dwelling bustards bobbed about the beach, never having flown over water and not liking the thought. "This lone island will not support your herds and people. Right now you are destroying half the animals in a summer single hunt. What will you eat when winter comes and the grass is gone? Can you and your herds live on moss and lichens?"

"We know that," complained the Khan. "We saw at once this island was too small even after we destroyed the settlements and drove away the people. Only the pox keeps us off the mainland."

"Exactly. So if I free you from the pox, you must abandon Korland, returning it completely to the original inhabitants."

"It shall be theirs," the Khan agreed, "as we will not be needing it."

"And the people you have driven from the mainland must be allowed to settle here." Stefan's Sea Beggars needed somewhere to live.

His highness shrugged. "Where they go matters not."

"And you must free all local children taken as slaves," she added.

"Death drives a hard bargin," the Black Sail Khan observed.

Kore smiled. "I have a reputation to uphold."

"So be it," the Khan declared. "Save us from the pox and you will have Korland back, and whatever slaves we have taken here."

"Then I will give you the secret of the Red Death. Smallpox is not caused by bad water, or evil spirits, it is a living entity, passing from person to person by contact, or through the breath. Breathing through cloth masks can actually slow the spread. It lives mainly in people, and less often in animals; in fact the pox cannot survive long outside a person, though it may live for a time in corpses, and on things that recently came from the sick, or dead. Where did the disease first hit you?"

"In the Inner Lands along the Great Wall. We fled westward onto the steppe, but the pox seemed to follow us, though we abandoned our sick and dying. And not just the sick but their families as well, and any who had spent time with them; we were utterly ruthless."

No doubt. Yet ruthlessness had failed for once. She told him about finding the flying-boat, and the corpse with the Cathayan ring on his finger. "The Cathayans are seeing you do not escape the pox. Fearing your flying-boats, they are using the disease to drive you away from the Great Wall. Right now an embassy is waiting for you to finish your hunt, and on

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their ship is a carrier named Autumn Rose, who will bring the disease to Korland, hopefully putting it right in your yurt."

"How can this woman carry the pox?" the Black Sail asked suspiciously. "Would it not kill her?"

"What you see as the disease, the fever, the blisters, the scarring, is not really the smallpox, it is your body fighting the disease. Some people — like me — are immune to the disease. My body easily destroys the pox, so I can sup with the sick and dying, without even breaking a sweat."

"How lucky for you," observed the Khan.

"Luck had nothing to do with it. My immunity was given to me as a girl when I trained to be demi-goddess. Other people are carriers; the disease lives in them without killing them, and their bodies do not fight it. Autumn Rose has no pocks or scars, yet she can give the disease to others, so the Cathayans keep her in a tiny room atop the masthead."

"Until she can be given to me." The Khan of the Black Sails shook his head. "They told me she was so beautiful she had to be kept safe from the sailors."

"No, the sailors were being kept safe from her." Kore thought of the frail scholar reading poetry in her little room. "Death is not always great and terrible. Sometimes it appears meek and mild, or even pretty."

"Like yourself." The Khan of the Black Sails relaxed his bow, slipping the arrow back into his quiver. Then he bowed his head, saying, "Lady Death, you have saved me and my family from terrible fates."

As terrible as the fates of Ustengrad, Zransky, Nordgorad, and Lulavik? Not likely. Men like him made her hate the living. Still she took it as a compliment, saying, "There is more. Luckily for you, my immunity can be reproduced." She showed him the scar on her arm. "I can show you how to produce the immunity; a harmless form of the disease may be gotten from cattle — called cow pox. Those who are given cow pox never get smallpox."

"That seems like a miracle." The Khan was a man of action, not medicine, more accustomed to spreading death than curing it.

"Yet here I am." She rose in her roc saddle. "Living proof the immunity works." Complete willingness to risk death always imparted the ring of truth.

Bowing his head, the Khan who knelt only to the winds thanked her.

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"You have given my people life when even the winds could not save us. We are a scrupulous people, and you have given much, asking for little in return. This is wise, for we are now in your debt. And to have the good will of the Black Sails is no small thing."

"Fine." She modestly accepted his thanks. "Now release all these animals."

"These animals? But why?" The Black Sail Khan looked as bewildered as the lemmings at his feet.

"They are also original inhabitants," she pointed out. "Free to live here unmolested by you."

His smile returned. "Death too may be scrupulous, it seems." She could see the Khan was pleased; the more painful the cure, the more the patient believed, and the Black Sail Khan needed to believe. If she was lying, he faced very unappetizing choices.

But she was not lying, not about smallpox at least, and in less than a month she was headed home in triumph aboard the *Sparrow*, running down the Korland Strait before a brisk northwest wind. Halfway down the strait, they passed the Cathayan ship hove to in a high-walled mainland cove, waiting out the wind, which had to veer more to the west before they could head home to Cathay. Seeing the ship, she told Stefan she still had one more task. "Make it a short one," he advised. "This wind worries me."

"Why?" she asked. "It is fair for home."

"Too fair." Stefan seemed determined to fear something — survivor's syndrome — Kore had seen before, when so many die that the living feel guilty, foreseeing their own deaths.

Urging Havoc into the air, she flew across to the Cathayan ship, creating a commotion when she landed on the mainyard. Leaping off her roc, she fairly ran along the yardarm to the window. Autumn Rose was there, scroll in hand, looking astonished. Kore told her, "I am heading south to safety. There is a place for you there, and a cure for your condition. Come, live, and be with people, otherwise I fear you will soon die."

Autumn Rose spun about and started grabbing scrolls. "Not too many," Kore advised. "I have a fine library, including Li Po and Tu Fu." Nocking her bow with a sleep arrow, she kept an eye on the ship below, but the crew just stared back in horror, watching Death drop out of the sky

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to carry off their prisoner-cum-plague-case on the back of a giant bird of prey. Hardly an auspicious omen.

Autumn Rose emerged with an armful of scrolls, and Kore hustled her along the mainyard and onto the roc. Two small women on one big roc would be hard; fortunately the *Sparrow* lay downwind, and if need be she could always dump the scrolls. Catching the wave of wind rolling over the southern headland, she worked back and forth to gain altitude. Looking back, she saw black shadows lifting off from Korland, the last of the Black Sails headed for the mainland. Yurts and herds had already been ferried across the straits, but the flying-boats had stayed behind, awaiting a favorable wind — until now.

At the top of the climb, she watched as the flying-boats swept low over the straits, headed for the cove where the Cathayans were sheltered. She saw what Stefan meant about the wind being too favorable; it was blowing from just the right quarter to let the flying-boats leave Korland, and keep the Cathayans penned in the straits, unable to escape into the Arctic Sea. Just the wind Black Sail shamans would pray for. Coming in low and in a line ahead, the flying-boats made masthead level attacks, each releasing a single big round ball at the ship below. Then the lightened flying-boat would soar upward, passing easily over the south headland, so close she saw the crews wave and smile.

Half the missiles missed, plunging harmlessly into the water alongside the ship, but the half that hit exploded in great balls of fire. She had seen these bombs back at the Black Sail camp, big glass balls filled with naphtha, and within each ball was a bottle of oxidizer — so when the bomb hit, ball and bottle shattered, mixing the contents and igniting the naphtha. By the time a dozen had hit, the Cathayan ship was aflame from stem to stern. Succeeding Black Sails dropped ballast instead, saving their naphtha balls for another time — while Autumn Rose wept for her scrolls.

With the wind at her back, Havoc bore her double load straight to the *Sparrow*, and Kore was finally home free. The *Sparrow*'s crew were the first ones inoculated — to show suspicious Black Sails that the serum made from cow pox was safe — so there was no need to cage Autumn Rose on the masthead, and for the first time in years the scholar walked freely among other people, making up in part for the loss of her scrolls.

Running back down toward Seagate, with Stefan beside her, Kore felt

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torn. High summer was here, the short season when everyone got ready for winter, and Stefan's Sea Beggars would be resettling Nordgorad and Lulavik. Shrines must be rededicated, and priestesses appointed, and there were many dead to pray over. Yet when summer was gone, where would she winter? At Seagate of course, but would Stefan be with her? Not if he was settled in Korland. Life was becoming far more complex than death had ever been. Hopefully, she could convince Stefan to winter the *Mermaid* at Seagate, where stores were ample, giving Korland fewer mouths to feed — but it was hard to have to count on someone else's wishes. And children by him would mean added wishes to consider. Death was an accomplished abortionist — in complete control of her body — but she wanted children, especially children with Stefan. Eros was to blame for all this, Eros and his arrows.

She got her chance to give Eros his dressing down when they arrived triumphantly at Seagate, announcing the return of Korland, and the retreat of the Black Sails. Calling her wayward cousin in for a private audience in her presence chamber, she upbraided him for daring to shoot her with one of his arrows.

"It was all I could do," Eros protested. "You were facing certain capture, probable rape, and imminent execution; I had to shoot him to protect you. Since that made rape even more likely, I had to shoot you too."

Turning it into consensual sex. Eros was nothing if not neat. "Damn you, what if I have children by him?"

"Mad because you might no longer be Miss Iron Drawers, Maiden Goddess of Death?"

"Demi-Goddess," she corrected her smiling cousin.

"Look, you have nailed this Death Goddess role, no one will ever do it better, but now you need to move to something new, like raising your replacement." Eros pursed his cupid's bow lips. "Having children is not so bad. So you might have to train Persephone to be Dark Daughter — what of it? You would still be Lady of Seagate, while Persephone would love the task, and could surely use the training. Start her out easy, make her Killer of Children, then let her work her way up."

"You have always had eyes for Persephone," she observed.

"Love smiles on everyone," Eros replied blandly. "So you cannot be

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both Death and Mother at the same time — things could be way worse. Look at me, I must go about seducing lovely innocent maidens and begetting beautiful bastards. No one ever asked if I wanted to, it is just expected of Love. Yet do you see me complain?"

"Thou art an inspiration to us all." She could see the interview going nowhere; as usual everything was up to her.

"Naturally," Eros beamed happily. "Love is all you need."

COMING ATTRACTIONS

TALES OF MEN AND GODS, or maidens and chickens, of ghosts and scholars, of heroes and zombies: the months ahead promise a very diverse group of stories.

Our cover story for February is "The Man on the Persian Carpet" by Kate Wilhelm, a story about love and time-travel, among other things.

Graham Joyce will make his *F&SF* debut in February with "Black Dust," a look at the hard lives of British coal miners.

We also expect to travel back to the Silurian Age with Steven Utley in "Foodstuff" next month.

Among the other tour guides we'll soon be joining are Dale Bailey, Albert E. Cowdrey (who will bring us back to the world of "Mosh"), M. Rickert, Jack Williamson, and Maureen F. McHugh. Coming soon, we've got stories set yesterday, today, and the day after tomorrow. Give a friend a gift subscription and they'll remember you throughout the year.

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CURIOSITIES

FINGERS OF FEAR, BY J. U. NICOLSON (1937)

RUINED IN the stock market crash of 1929, Selden Seaverns gratefully accepts a job from rich school chum Ormond Ormes to catalog books in the family library at Ormesby. Selden's trials following his arrival at the Ormes Estate are more than even the most desperate employee should have to endure: He is noshed on by Ormes's vampire sister, trapped in the subterranean lime pit where family skeletons are interred, and set upon by Ormes himself, who has a penchant for turning feral and who, it seems, is in cahoots with Selden's estranged ex-wife to frame him for a ghastly crime.

J. U. Nicolson's novel is crude shudder fiction, yet it achieved hardcover publication at a time when works of similar scope were relegated to the pulp magazines. Doubtless, its author's track record as a translator of François Villon and "interpreter" of Chaucer had much to do with this. But, possibly, so did the story's undercurrent of social commentary. At a time when much popular fiction was intended to distract readers from the national misery, here was a book that confronted them with a none-too-subtle portrait of the rich preying upon the poor. Selden repeatedly expresses his belief that prosperity is "just around the corner," but at every turn finds just another form of victimization by his wealthy patron.

Fingers of Fear appears to have been Nicolson's only effort in the weird vein, but its clever use of horror imagery to limn the curse of the starving class demonstrates how sometimes the more intriguing contributions to a genre are penned by those outside it.

—Stefan Dziemianowicz

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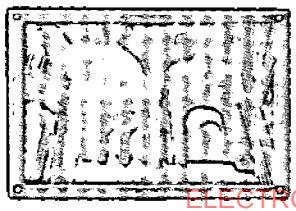

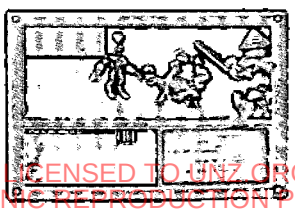

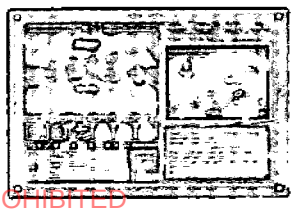

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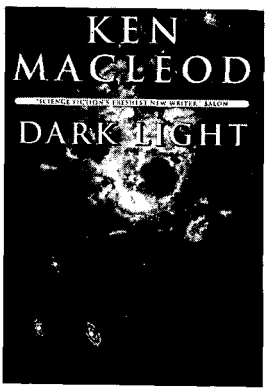

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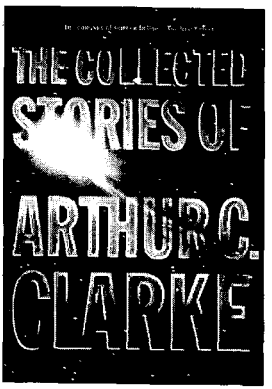

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